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Mia Liinason and Robert Kulpa  
Special issue editors

### Queer Studies: Methodological approaches

During the three days in the beginning of May 2007, the Nordic Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies arranged the PhD-course *What's up in Queer Theory? Recent Developments in Queer Studies* at the Centre for Gender Studies, Lund university, Sweden. There, Judith Halberstam, Tiina Rosenberg and Tuula Juvonen gave lectures about queer archives and genealogies of queer. A significant number of discussions focused around the need for displacements of power and the importance of context in the queer academic and activist practises. Several questions also emerged during this three-day course that solicited further problematisation. The idea for the current special issue of the *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, devoted to discussions around/about meanings and functions of the word “queer” was born.

Recent publications in queer studies point towards several directions, such as the dimension of “anti-social”-ity of “queer”, temporalities of non-normative desires, and geographies of non-Western sexualities. Clearly “there is something in the air” around these issues, which quickly became noticeable from the abstracts we received for consideration for publication. Problems of contextualizations of queer; the reception in non-English speaking contexts where “queer” is an empty word without history and negative connections; the impact of spatial and temporal contexts on queer formation and academic practises of story telling and a problematisation of privileges, positionality and canon setting in queer studies of today – are the hot topics. The following selection of eight contributions is the first of two planned. **Thus, we are happy to announce now that GJSS will be publishing a follow up issue on queer methodologies in March**, to accommodate another set of interesting papers we received in the call out for this issue.

The December 2008 issue follows a certain logic that emerged from submitted papers. The opening article of acclaimed academic Tiina Rosenberg on queer genealogies is followed by a series of papers dealing with issues of self-reflexivity, intersections, dispersion, and accommodations of “queer” to non-Western (English) contexts. The closing articles scrutinise

identity and materiality of objects and bodies, to be metaphorically summarised in Judith Halberstam's article on “non-identification” and “negativity” of “queerness”.

In the opening article to this issue of *GJSS*, Swedish queer and feminist scholar and activist Tiina Rosenberg reminds us about often forgotten feminist legacy of queer studies, both in their academic and activist approaches. Additionally, by reflecting on the local, Swedish case, her paper establishes an excellent way and route of thinking and scrutinisation, taken up in the following articles in this issue.

The uses and historical development of the word “queer” is investigated in the subsequent article, where Liv Mertz traces not only valuable insight in to the Danish culture and the way the foreign word “queer” was nested in academic circles, but also offers some critique on the process of such translation. Another significant contribution of Mertz is the use of auto-narrative form for a scholarly paper, producing still “unusual” (at least in more traditionally oriented academic circles) academic story-telling.

The intersections of “queer” and “diaspora” is the topic of exploration of the next ensuing article, which, as Michaela Baldo writes herself: “aims at analysing the ways in which the term has been recontextualised in this transnational context with reference to issues of ethnicity. Within cultural theory the concepts of ‘queer’ and ‘diaspora’ have been informed by post-modern and post-colonial theory and have intervened on theories of time, space and identity infusing them with notions of transgression, contingency, power and conflict”.

In “‘Latino’ and ‘queer’ as sites of translation: Intersections of ‘race’, ethnicity and sexuality” María Amelia Viteri discovers how the voices of LGBT Latinos brings up the need of a translation of categories such as ‘queer,’ ‘Latino/ Latinidad’ and ‘American’. Viteri thus intervenes in typically ‘Western’ systems of classification, and illustrates in her piece how translating across “fields of power” can generate methodological and theoretical tools to “better account for the privileged position of ‘Western’ thought”. Viteri shows how ‘Latino’, ‘queer’ and ‘American’ are located within particular cartographies of place, desire and belonging and introduces a border-crossing ‘queer’ methodology where sexual and gender

‘crossing’ have a potential to challenge perceptions and readings around race, ethnicity and class.

Elisabeth Engebretsen in her ethnography-informed paper presents Chinese lesbian “lala” culture. However, what she is interested in, is not only the “lala” community, but also a role and position of a Western academic researching non-Western sexualities. Engebretsen clearly places herself in the camp of sexuality scholars who see the urgent need of self-reflexivity in the western queer studies field, and prompts us to “ponder the possibilities and limits of current analytical frameworks”.

Intervening in to the discourses of old age as either ““successful”” or ““a decline””, Linn Sandberg makes use of the anti-social turn in queer theory in order to challenge normal and good ageing in her piece “The Old, the Ugly and the Queer: thinking old age in relation to queer theory”. Through an analysis of queer theoretical notions such as failure and the abject, Sandberg discusses some implications of bringing old age into queer theory, where, as she writes “a turn to queer theory may not only confront ageism but imply a resurrection of knowledges springing from the old, ugly and the queer”.

In 1992, Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman published their piece “Queer Nationality”, noting that the tactics of Queer Nation was to show how inappropriate xenophobia is, through reversing the hate speech against gays to a hate speech of straights (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 170). Nevertheless, Berlant and Freeman had difficulties finding any space in Queer Nation for those who did not identify with “the national fantasy of the white male citizen”. Thus, and in an intervention into the imperialism, nationalism and hegemony of US queer activism, they turn to descriptions of a negative identity as a “space of nonidentification” which they can inhabit (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 176). This turn to negativity is also pointed out by Judith Halberstam in her essay in this issue of the GJSS, where she engages with the anti-social project, arguing for the need of a more explicitly political framing of the project, and search for an “archive of alternatives”, mixing high and low and provides examples from a feminist or post colonial context through the works by Valerie Solanas and Jamaica Kincaid, and through the works by performance artists, such as Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono.



In the review section, excellently edited by Melissa Fernandez, this issue of *GJSS* introduces five books covering a wide range of topics, such as a methodology and pluralism, queer bisexuality and youth culture, spirituality, sexualities and public culture in China of today.

Thanks to the possibility of an engagement with many interesting intellectual conversations around queer methodologies, connected to politics, culture, history and society located in European, Asian and American contexts, the work on this issue of the *GJSS* has been a true enjoyment. We want to acknowledge the team of anonymous referees for contributing with their competence to the production of this issue. We also want to thank to the members of the special issue advisory board, who have shared their knowledge and contacts on the field. Here, we want to send special thanks to Tuula Juvonen, whose careful input and expertise has been of great importance for the editorial team. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the Nordic research school of interdisciplinary gender studies, for making this issue financially possible.

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Tiina Rosenberg  
Lund University  
tiina.rosenberg@genus.lu.se

### **LOCALLY QUEER. A Note on the Feminist Genealogy of Queer Theory**

The word queer landed in Sweden in a terminological and theoretical vacuum. It was not that nobody had studied issues and theories relating to sexualities and identities before queer theory were introduced, but the approach of the then new queer theory was slightly different. Above all, it concerned a term that had no history in the Swedish language. Queer is not a Swedish word, and therefore it could signify a bit of this and that. In English the queer word has been associated with homophobic etymological roots that have no linguistic correspondence in Swedish. Therefore, the introduction of the word queer evoked an entirely different debate in the English-speaking countries, where many lesbians, gays and transgender people took umbrage at a word that was so strongly associated with a negatively charged history, than in Sweden, where queer was simply a new and foreign theoretical and activist term.<sup>1</sup>

In Sweden, the word queer did not initially gain a foothold, except in a limited academic sphere and in the Swedish gay press where it was greeted with some hesitation. In all other respects, queer was one of many incomprehensible words that did not have any distinct content. Matters got even trickier when it turned out that even those who had helped introduce the term queer both invested the word with different meanings, and also considered that queer should not be hampered with an exact definition. Its purpose was to confuse, disturb and serve as a dissonance in both academic thinking and in discussions on sexual politics. Over the years, however, queer theory has gained momentum as an inter-disciplinary research perspective at Swedish universities. Above all, the queer theory approach has become a valuable analytical instrument for the studies of normative heterosexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> As an introduction to Queer Theory see: Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, New York: New York University Press, 1996; Max H. Kirsch, *Queer Theory and Social Change*, London & New York: Routledge, 2000; Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.





In discussions of what queer is or is not, opinions depend to a high degree on how the participants in such a debate relate to the genealogy of queer theory. Political argumentations about concepts are often remarkably streamlined when history is being written. It is as if everyone has been on the same journey. We who teach and write outside the English-speaking sphere are especially apt to feel that “everybody” in the USA is communicating with each other, but of course that is not the case. A contribution to this historical reflection on the feminist genealogies of the word queer is made in a footnote to Teresa de Lauretis’ introduction to the journal *differences*’ theme issue on “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” (1991), in which she points out that she was not aware of the activist group Queer Nation’s existence at the time when she launched the term queer: “The term ‘queer’ was suggested to me by a conference in which I had participated and whose proceedings will be published in the forthcoming volume, ed. by Douglas Crimp and the Bad Object Choices, ‘How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video.’ My ‘queer’ however, had no relation to the Queer Nation group, of whose existence I was ignorant at the time. As the essays will show there is very little common between Queer Nation and this queer theory.”<sup>2</sup> This is a poignant reminder that a phenomenon that may appear from a non-American perspective as a uniform queer-activist and queer-theory discourse is far from that. The point I wish to make in this article is to shortly reflect on the reception of the word queer in Sweden and underline the strong impact that lesbian-feminist theory has had on queer theory. This cannot be over-emphasised in a discussion on the genealogies of queer theory.

## **Queer Theory**

Queer theory is not a homogeneous or systematic school of thought, but a mixture of studies that focus critically on heteronormativity, i.e., those institutions, structures, relations and acts that support heterosexuality as a uniform, natural and all-embracing primordial sexuality. Queer

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<sup>2</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction”, in: *differences*, Volume 3, no. 2/ 1991, p. xvii, footnote 2.



theory bases itself on the theoretical discussions within lesbian feminist theory and gay studies relating to the dominant and normative position held by heterosexuality in western society.<sup>3</sup>

In the early days of queer theory, in the 1990s, scholars and philosophers had a common base in textual analysis and interpretation of visual culture and politics, and most had their starting point in women's studies, feminist theory and lesbian and gay studies. The relationship between queer theory, lesbian and gay studies was initially a bit fraught. The introductory phase of queer theory incorporated a substantial helping of euphoria concerning this new approach, since it was envisioned that old structures would now be disintegrated. However, in the 1990s, and especially in the 2000s, it has grown increasingly obvious that the structural imbalance between heterosexuality and homosexuality is not that easy to abolish, despite the enthusiasm and energy that characterised the early queer-euphoric phase.<sup>4</sup>

Queer studies have primarily been related to gender variation and non-heterosexual practices where other possible aspects such as ethnicity, class and also disabilities have begun to be acknowledged. There is also, however, an intra-categorical problem that has become increasingly apparent over the queer 1990s and early 2000s. Just as the gender perspective was missing for many years in gay studies, gender studies likewise lacked a queer perspective. One could also query the fruitfulness of studying lesbians, homosexual men and transgender people as *a* group, since these categories show significant differences in their composition. Queer scholar Judith Halberstam points out that when it comes to queer historiography and queer biographies, it is rather pointless to study lesbians and homosexual men as a group. Even though there are similarities, their histories are different in many relevant aspects. With regard to

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<sup>3</sup> 1990 was a symbolic year for the re-launch of the word queer. This was when Queer Nation distributed its manifesto "Queers Read This", Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published *Epistemology of the Closet*. It was Teresa de Lauretis, however, who launched the theoretic term *queer* in 1990 at a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The queer word was first discussed in 1991 in the feminist journal *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in a special edition that consisted of papers presented at the conference. The historian George Chauncey discusses the use of the word queer in the early 20th century in *The Gay New York.: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Rosenberg (2002), pp. 13-14.



lesbian and transsexual people, similarities can be found in gender variation, but again Halberstam claims that their respective histories are different.<sup>5</sup>

A central aspect of queer studies is that they did not focus simply on heteronormativity, but, like post-colonial studies, also maintained a tradition from lesbian and gay studies of supporting continued research in the field of LGBTQI.<sup>6</sup> However, the gay male norm in this field of research has often been criticised, and Halberstam poses the intriguing question of whether the new interdisciplinary studies in fields such as gender studies will also enrich queer studies.<sup>7</sup>

### **Compulsory heterosexuality**

In feminist discussions on political concepts, sexuality has a very special place. Sexuality can be regarded as a physiological/biological, psychological and/or cultural and social issue. The biological perspective emphasises sexuality as something we are born with, “natural”, and by nature primarily heterosexual and penetration-oriented, with reproduction as its main purpose. This attitude was represented, above all, by the sexology that emerged in the late 1800s and which principally focused on sexual behaviour. In 21st century gender studies, sexuality is discussed as representation, discourse, narrative and/or identity, rather than as physiology and biology.

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Queer Studies, A Companion to Gender Studies*, in Philomena Essed, David Theo Goldberg & Audrey Kobayashi (eds.), Blackwell, 2005, pp. 62-70.

<sup>6</sup> The term heteronormativity was established as a theoretical concept in gender-orientated feminist and queer studies in the 1990s. In the early 1990s, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler had previously used terms such as heterosexism (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 30-32) and heterosexual matrix (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 151: footnote 6) or heterosexual hegemony (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 4-12). Monique Wittig in the 1980s used the heterosexual contract (Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, pp. 40-43), while Adrienne Rich launched the term compulsory heterosexuality (Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, *Signs* no. 5/1980). The first use of the term heteronormativity is usually attributed to Michael Warner in his introduction to the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet* (pp. vii-xxx). Already in 1991, Warner had discussed similar issues in an article, “Fear of a Queer Planet” in *Social text* no. 29/1991. Another early reference to the term heteronormativity is found in Chris Brickell, who quotes an article by Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, “Putting the Heterosexual Order in Crisis” from 1992 (*Mediations*, 16 [2], pp. 17-23). In the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet* the term heteronormativity was used by Steven Seidman (p. 130) and Diane Richardson discussed the term in her introduction to *Theorising Heterosexuality* (1996).

<sup>7</sup> Halberstam (2005), pp. 62-70.



The discussion on sexual politics concerning lesbianism versus heterosexuality has been going on for many years within feminism. The division into lesbian and heterosexual feminists has always entailed a clear dividing line in the feminist movement and also in feminist theory. When sexuality was politicised in the 1970s, lesbianism could no longer be regarded merely as an alternative lifestyle or a sexual practice, but also constituted a critique of the compulsory heterosexuality and of heterosexuality as a social institution. Sexuality was not a matter of inborn, natural inclination; instead, the analyses began increasingly to focus on the social and cultural organisation of sexuality that clearly denounced same-sex sexuality.

In the foreword of the Swedish translation of the essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, Adrienne Rich states that this essay was written to challenge the exclusion of lesbian existence in a large part of feminist academic literature. She experienced this to be anti-feminist in its consequences. The essay was also written to change the perspective of heterosexual women. Not to fire the antagonism between lesbians and heterosexuals, but to encourage heterosexual feminists to explore and change heterosexuality as a political institution that makes women powerless. Rich also hoped that other lesbians would experience the depth and width of female identification and the sense of community between women that has been forever present, albeit periodically suppressed, in the heterosexual experience.<sup>8</sup>

Out of all the radical feminist writing, Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” and Monique Wittig’s “The Straight Mind” have been the most influential publications prior to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* with regard to heterosexuality. Even if these texts differ greatly, especially in their approach to lesbianism, both Rich and Wittig regard heterosexuality as something prescribed. Rich writes of compulsory heterosexuality, and Wittig of the compulsory social relationship (the heterosexual contract) between “woman” and “man”. Rich identifies a variety of ways in which women are forced into heterosexuality. If heterosexuality had been natural, these forceful measures would hardly be

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<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Rich, Foreword to the Swedish translation of “Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” by Pia Laskar: “Obligatorisk heterosexualitet och lesbisk existens”, Stockholm: MATRIX, 1986, p. 1.



necessary. And the threats and punishments against the rebels who fled compulsory heterosexuality would be even more superfluous.<sup>9</sup>

Adrienne Rich explains oppression of women through compulsory heterosexuality as a social system where wedlock is particularly emblematic of the repressive institution. Not only does compulsory heterosexuality tie heterosexual women to men and male institutions, it also serves as an effective obstacle to contact between women. Heterosexuality is not a natural or free choice, but a multifaceted weave of normative practices. By virtue of its privileged position, heterosexuality is able to maintain its status as being natural and a matter of course.

This matter-of-courseness is the power that maintains heterosexuality; or rather, the matter-of-courseness of heterosexuality lies at the core of its cultural dominance, what the feminist scholar Iris Marion Young identifies as one of the forms of oppression. She uses the term oppression as a collective noun for a whole family of terms and social conditions, which she divides into five categories: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural dominance and violence.<sup>10</sup> In this extended structural definition, the term oppression refers to those social injustices that afflict certain groups on account of frequently unconscious preconceptions and behaviour patterns among ordinary, decent fellow-beings in everyday encounters, in the media and cultural stereotypes, in contacts with bureaucratic structures and hierarchies and in various “markets”. That is, in everyday life. Structural oppression cannot, according to Young, be abolished by replacing certain people in power or by adopting new laws, since the oppression is systematically produced and reproduced in society’s fundamental economic and cultural institutions.<sup>11</sup>

Compulsory heterosexuality is one such form of oppression. Compulsory heterosexuality operates on all levels, both in private and in public. In line with Adrienne Rich’s analysis of motherhood as a political institution in her book *Of Woman Born*, she proposes in her essay on

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<sup>9</sup> Tiina Rosenberg, *Queerfeministisk agenda (Queerfeminist Agenda)*, Stockholm: Atlas, 2002, pp. 84-87; Tiina Rosenberg, *L-ordet: Vart tog alla lesbiska vägen? (The L-Word: Where Have All the Lesbians Gone?)*, Stockholm: Normal, 2006, pp. 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression”, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 39-65.

<sup>11</sup> Young, *ibid.*



compulsory heterosexuality that heterosexuality must be regarded and analysed as a political institution.<sup>12</sup>

Like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Rich claims that violence has always been used to uphold heterosexuality. Society invests heavily in heterosexuality. Rich discusses two basic concepts: lesbian existence and lesbian continuum. Lesbian existence is, she writes, the lesbian presence in history, whereas lesbian continuum is “to include a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.”<sup>13</sup> Lesbian existence entails, according to Rich, to both break a taboo and to eschew a life under compulsion. It is also a direct or indirect attack on men’s right of access to women. Above all, however, lesbian existence involves saying “No thank you” to the patriarchy, and thus serves as an act of resistance.

If Rich primarily discusses the situation of women, Wittig discusses the way in which heteronormativity is built into the western conscious. She writes that the straight mind is based on universalism and thinking in differences. The heteronormative mind perceives and constructs all difference as something unlike heterosexuality: “To constitute a difference and to control it is an ‘act of power, since it is essentially a normative act. Everybody tries to show the other as different. But not everybody succeeds in doing so. One has to be socially dominant to succeed in it.’”<sup>14</sup>

### **Gender and/or sexuality?**

The institutional framework for LGBTQI studies has consisted/consists of the traditional disciplines and institutions for women’s and gender studies, and, where they exist, a small number of institutions of lesbian and gay studies (not in Sweden, however, where this tradition

<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale & David M Halperin (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 227-254.

<sup>13</sup> Rich in Abelove, p. 239.

<sup>14</sup> Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1980, p.29. (Wittig is referring here to Claude Faugeron and Philippe Robert, *La justice et son public et les représentations sociales du système pénal*, Paris: Masson, 1978).



is very limited). These continue to be vital centres of research and studies in the field, but it is obvious that queer studies are increasingly being integrated with gender studies, thanks mainly to Judith Butler's gender theory.<sup>15</sup>

This was far from the anticipated outcome. The question of whether gender and sexuality should be studied as separate and mutually independent categories has been fiercely debated. In the introduction to the seminal anthology *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* the subject of the research field is defined: "Lesbian/gay studies are to sex and sexuality what women's studies are to sex/gender."<sup>16</sup> The discussion gathered momentum in Gayle Rubin's classic essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Politics of Sexuality" (1982), in which she distinguishes between sex and sexuality. Rubin analyses the social construction of sexual hierarchies and the consistent demonising of non-normative sexualities. Her conclusion is that gender influences sexual systems and that sexual systems have a gender-specific expression. But even if gender and sexuality are related phenomena, they are not the same thing but constitute two separate social practices. According to Rubin, feminist theory has developed tools for analysing gender hierarchies. The extent to which these categories are interlinked is a question that feminist theory has not been able to answer, she claims. As for sexuality, feminist analyses can be not only misleading but often irrelevant. Feminists, according to Rubin, lack the perspective and tools to fully comprehend the social organisation of sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

For the purposes of queer theory, Rubin's ideas are developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, where she claims that sexuality has a form of non-definability that gender does not have. Sedgwick writes that practically all people are bound to either of the genders, whereas sexuality, in its ambiguity, is a more adequate object for deconstruction.<sup>18</sup> Biddy Martin argues against Kosofsky Sedgwick in the essay "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias" where she takes a positive attitude to queer theory but cautions against dismissing gender too lightly as a meaningful category for analysis.<sup>19</sup> In an

<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg (2002), pp. 71-73.

<sup>16</sup> Abelove et.al., p. xv.

<sup>17</sup> Gayle Rubin: "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", in Abelove et. al., pp. 3-44.

<sup>18</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Biddy Martin, "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Utopias", in *Femininity Played Straight. The Significance of Being Lesbian*, New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 71-96.





article of a later date, “Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary”, Martin stresses that queer theorists will end up in a dead end if they assume that gender identities and sexual identities are either so uncertain or fluctuating that they are irrelevant, or so definite and repressive that they must be avoided. It is by making the variations visible that queer theory can stretch the boundaries for what is culturally comprehensible.<sup>20</sup>

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler settles the accounts with the aspects of feminist theory that she finds irritating. The political message of *Gender Trouble* was the refutation of essentialist identity politics in the women’s movement, regardless of whether the objective was to favour the policies of white heterosexual women or, for that matter, to represent lesbian separatist policies. “The writing of *Gender Trouble* was perhaps the acerbic culmination of that history of unease and anger within feminism,” Butler writes.<sup>21</sup> A large portion of this unease stemmed from the binary division into “women” and “men” that appeared to form the constant precondition for feminist thinking. Not only was this dichotomy annoying in itself. Its elevation to veritably theological status, as something “teleological” in some schools of French feminism, was more than Butler could stomach. Added to this was the tacit and obligatory supposition regarding the all-encompassing heterosexuality that was supported by the binary gender categorisation. This binarism, Butler argues, places complementary relationships or asymmetries between the gender categories in a way that simply reinforces, without marking out, the heterosexist conditions of the paradigm. Marking gender and sexuality as two separate fields, Butler claims, initially felt consistent for many scholars of lesbian and gay studies, in view of heterosexism on the whole, but also as a means of allowing and discovering dissonances between different sex/gender understandings and sexualities.<sup>22</sup> But can gender and sexuality really be separated from one another? Butler asks. The question is rhetorical. She realises that such a separation always comes at a price and that gender would nevertheless make a ghostlike comeback if it were excluded as an analytical category.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Bidy Martin, “Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary”, in *Femininity Played Straight. The Significance of Being Lesbian*, pp. 45-70.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects, in Elizabeth Weed & Naomi Schor (eds.), in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Butler, (1997), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Butler (1997), pp. 4-9.





### **What does the term queer signify today?**

There are theoretical vogues in academia. Some theorists, terms, ideas appear at a given point in time to be more relevant than others. By using specific terms, we mark out our theoretic belonging, but the meaning of the terms varies depending on how they are used. Concept politics are about current definition battles, while concept history looks at the long-term structures in which the ideas have been expressed and the political events that have taken place. Concept history searches for climaxes and turning points that make it possible to study the idiomatic landscape in a new light. The idiomatic landscape has been strongly focused in social sciences and the humanities over the past decades, when poststructuralist theorists have wanted to explain all human experience in terms of language. Almost everything has been about discourse, nothing seem to have existed outside language and any comprehensive description that took a stand suddenly appeared so terribly naïve.

Both feminist research and queer studies have underlined that sexuality should be regarded as a construct produced by differences and power relationships. The question is where the emancipatory effort that was so essential to feminist theory and politics disappeared in the queer project? The history of the term emancipation harbours centuries of experiences and expectations. This aspect has always been central in feminist studies and even for the more classical variety of lesbian and gay studies. Around 1800, when the term emancipation came into common usage, it could summarise a historic process by which groups, not to say humanity as a whole, liberated itself from its oppressors and come of age. Thus, it is a revolutionary and promising term. The idea of emancipation should be seen as a process, a historic-philosophical movement concept that indicated entire processes and helped to solve them.

The idea of emancipation is closely associated with political activism, but academic accounts of queer theory have not always taken into consideration the activist roots of the word queer. “Historians who chronicle political movements rarely address parallel developments in academic writing, and academic theorists are none-too-consistent about acknowledging the



influence of direct-action politics on their scholars”, feminist scholar Linda Garber writes in *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*.<sup>24</sup> She also points out that only with a few exceptions, queer theorists have obscured the activist genealogy by emphasizing their academic predecessors, among them Continental postmodern philosophies, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and cultural studies.<sup>25</sup> Garber emphasizes that poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism all took place within academic in the U.S. after the literature, theory, and activism of lesbian-feminist / working-class / women of colour had established difference as the unavoidable, integral topic of U.S. feminism on all levels.<sup>26</sup>

When the term queer was established in the Swedish academic and political vocabulary, it came to encompass a duality that characterises the Swedish local version of queer. While queer in the USA was largely an anti-identity project, queer in Sweden became identity politics. The most important thing queer has accomplished in Sweden is the introduction and establishment of the term heteronormativity.<sup>27</sup> The identity-political angling of the term queer in Sweden must reasonably be linked to the fact that there was an obvious need to formulate issues of identity politics in a new way. Borrowed words can never be simply imported from one culture to another since the context is entirely decisive to the use of the term. One of my most powerful memories from many long lecture tours on the theme of queer theory is that the marginalisation, outsidership and foreignness that queer theory formulated had relevance to very many groups of individuals. One of the most common questions concerned who was entitled to call themselves queer, even though the term never actually denoted a position of identity.

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<sup>24</sup> Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*, 2001, pp. 176-177.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The word *heteronormativity* was established as a theoretical term in Gender and Queer Studies during the 1990's. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler did not initially use the term heteronormativity, they used terms *heterosexism* (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 30-32) and *the heterosexual matrix* (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 151: foot note 6) or *heterosexual hegemony* (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 4-12). Monique Wittig used in the 1980's the term *the heterosexual contract* (Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, s. 40-43), and Adrienne Rich introduced the term *the compulsory heterosexuality* (Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, *Signs* Nr. 5/1980). Michael Warner used the term *heteronormativity* in his introduction to the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet* (pp. vii-xxxi). Warner had already 1991 discussed heteronormativity in *Social Text* Nr. 29/1991 (“Fear of a Queer Planet”) Another early reference to heteronormativity as a term is in Chris Brickell's quotation of Rosemary Hennessy's and Chrys Ingraham's article “Putting the Heterosexual Order in Crisis” from 1992 (*Mediations*, 16 [2], p. 17-23). In the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet* the term *heteronormativity* was also used by Steven Seidman (p. 130). Diane Richardsson discussed the term *heteronormativity* in her introduction to *Theorising Heterosexuality* (1996).

It is impossible to know in advance how a new term will land and what impact it will have. Swedish feminist scholar Pia Laskar writes “that the enormous tension that has arisen between different camps could be resolved by sorting out the misunderstandings and improving knowledge about the oppression that queer theory specifically pinpoints.”<sup>28</sup> As usual, however, the development of the new field is celebrated on the grave of the old field. Since the new field cannot immediately take over its predecessor’s far-reaching territory, it proceeds in some directions, not all, as the sociologist Leslie McCall points out.<sup>29</sup> This is the case with the term queer, a term that is actively used in Sweden and currently has three main meanings: firstly, as an umbrella for the LGBTQI group (lesbian/gay/bi/trans/queer/intersex) and studies focusing on this group; secondly as an expression for a militant form of LGBTQI activism, summarised by the term queer activism, and characterised by an uncompromising in-your-face attitude; and thirdly, as a political and theoretical critique of heteronormativity.

The hardest history lesson appears to be to give honour where it is due. When the term queer was introduced by AIDS activists in the late 1980s and by academics in 1990, they had different purposes for using the term. The AIDS activists in ACT UP and Queer Nation were fighting for their own group, while the academics wanted to problematise lesbian and gay identities and associated studies. In an Americanised discourse, which several Western nations adopt, the division in queer studies has circled around the “gay pride” motto of the former identity politics movement, i.e. proud of being homosexual. Its queer correspondence is “gay shame”, which instead focuses on shame as the most determining component in the definition of queer as something despised, marginalised and excluded.

We need not discard the word queer, however, even though it often these days serve as a mainstream term and not as a fully critical phenomenon. We will have to live with the fact that queer has already become a link in our conceptual history. The institutionalisation of queer theory has meant that it has not entirely been able to stick to its original critical content. But we should not lose sight of the term queer, but instead remind ourselves constantly that even if it has become a conventional element, it nevertheless still has a critical potential.

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<sup>28</sup> Pia Laskar, “Queert dilemma”, *Arena*, no. 3/2003, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Leslie McCall, “Intersektionalitetens komplexitet”, *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* no. 2-3/2005, p. 39.



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Liv Mertz  
University of Copenhagen  
liv@mertzlingo.dk

**“I am what I am?”  
Toward a Sexual Politics of Contingent Foundations<sup>1</sup>**

**Prelude**

Up until the mid-1990s, “queer” in a Danish setting largely remained a term that only Danes traveling in English-speaking countries, film connoisseurs, or translators needed to familiarize themselves with. To these initiates, “queer” was an American slur primarily targeting gay men. Precocious AIDS activists may also have looked to the U.S. and picked up on the stir caused by Queer Nation and hence the new meanings that the term was acquiring, but other than that the phrase stayed obscure to the majority of Danes. The ways in which “queer” finally came to denote a radical challenge to identity politics, a reading strategy, an academic theory,<sup>2</sup> and a way of life also in Denmark are too intricate for me to trace in this paper: I am neither a historian nor an etymologist. Suffice it to say that my compatriots were slow to adopt what sounds like a rustic pronunciation of the Danish word for heifers (“kvier”). By the time Judith Butler was admonishing her readers to be “critically queer” (Butler 1993: 223), I was still two years away from my seemingly incurable contagion. I contracted the queer perspective when I stayed a semester at SUNY-Binghamton in 1995 and never stopped preaching when I returned.

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<sup>1</sup> A far more informal version of this paper was originally given at the *Queer Questions to Representational Politics* symposium organized by the PPhiG (Politics of Philosophy and Gender) School in Berlin, May 11-12, 2007. The title of the paper was then “I am what I am?” Toward a sexual politics of perspective and solidarity.’ The feedback I received at the symposium, however, made me realize that phrases like “perspective” and “solidarity” imply ontological subjects: *Who* is looking and from where? *Who* is acting in solidarity and with whom? I thank the participants, notably Katriina Honkanen, for directing my attention to this pitfall. ‘Contingent Foundations’ is the title of an essay by Judith Butler in Scott & Butler (1992: 3-21).

<sup>2</sup> For a list of suggested reading relevant in a Danish – and, by extension, Scandinavian – context, please see my entry in the online encyclopedia *Leksikon for det 21. århundrede* (‘Encyclopedia For The 21st Century’): <http://www.leksikon.org/art.php?n=5013>.



## Word's Out

“Queer” is, as the call for papers for this issue of the Graduate Journal of Social Science states, a relatively empty signifier in non-English contexts. One might have expected that this lack of negative connotations would have *facilitated* the introduction of the term into the Danish academy and gay subculture, seeing that neither were forced to debate whether the term would be able to ‘overcome its constitutive history of injury’ (Butler 1993: 223) first. Somehow, however, this potential obstacle to absorbing what was now becoming a buzzword never seemed to play a significant role, although my allegation is hard to document because written material on the Danish genealogy of the concept of “queer” has been scarce so far. To a country in which gay men and lesbians had long been acting in concert, it was rather the feminist connotations that obstructed the adoption of “queer.” And indeed, the most prolific “queer” distillate today appears to have very *little* to do with feminism.<sup>3</sup> In the current discursive climate, I would venture the claim that to most Danes, “queer” means “permissive,” “promiscuous,” “boundless,” “avant-garde,” etc. Seasoned with anti-sexist and anti-racist awareness, I would have no objections to people embracing all these adjectives, but if the agents stay willfully oblivious to all other modes of oppression than those based on sexual orientation, this is a manifestation of the “queer” that I can certainly do without.<sup>4</sup> Regrettably, the prevalent scenery is also a far cry from the Butlerian non-identitarian theory that I became so enamored of in 1995. But then again, you can hardly expect society to resonate with the hopelessly understaffed and notoriously inadequately funded gender studies centers.<sup>5</sup> Finally, intellectuals in general are not too popular in Denmark at this historical moment and thus cannot really set the trend.

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<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, an event that took place on May 24, 2007 – organized by DJs affiliated with the self-proclaimed queer performance group *Dunst* (see [http://dunst.dk/dunst/about\\_us/index.html](http://dunst.dk/dunst/about_us/index.html)) in Copenhagen – was titled “Date Rape.”

<sup>4</sup> The so-called Queer Festival (see <http://www.queerfestival.org>), however, is a welcome exception to this tendency. The festival attempts to embrace “feminism” as well as “queer” – indeed uniting the two under the rubric of “queer feminism.” The festival was launched in 2006 and is run in accordance with the DIY (Do It Yourself) principle.

<sup>5</sup> As of October 2008, only one gender studies department (actually only a “center” under The Department of Scandinavian Studies and Linguistics at The University of Copenhagen) can be said to exist in Denmark.





## Queer Questions – Round One

Fortunately, there is a vibrant alternative which I decided to introduce to an international audience when I happened upon a call for papers containing this sentence, ‘Putting together “representative” and “representational politics” and “the queer” [...] is a true challenge, and, for at least some of us, a contradiction in terms.’<sup>6</sup> The paradoxical nature of the task at hand was exactly what inspired me to submit an abstract for the conference. As an academic activist and activist academic, ‘queer questions to representational politics’ are indeed what I seem to be spending most of my waking hours posing.

As the organizers of the PPhiG symposium encouraged the contributors to treat the queer and the political ‘as radically historical phenomena, located in both time and place,’ (ibid.) my paper revolves around my concrete experiences as a political activist. If we – as I do – consider “queer” to signify a set of analytical tools for highlighting and challenging heteronormativity rather than just another identity category, what forms might our resistance take? How do we avoid practicing “representational politics,” i.e. speaking on someone’s behalf, while at the same time remaining sensitive to the needs of minorities with whom we may – at times – share certain political interests? What do we mean by representational politics? And how is our work perceived by the Red-Green Alliance?<sup>7</sup> What impact does founder of the German *Institut für Queer Theory* Antke Engel’s suggestion that “representation” may also denote meaning production and reality construction have on this discussion?<sup>8</sup> And who are “we?”

These are some of the main questions that preoccupy the Queer Committee – ØQ for short – of the Danish Red-Green Alliance. Since its formation in 2002, the members have been

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<sup>6</sup> To read the call for papers in its entirety, please refer to [http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/PolCon/coepolcon/PPhG/events/queer\\_and\\_politics\\_07.html](http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/PolCon/coepolcon/PPhG/events/queer_and_politics_07.html).

<sup>7</sup> According to the party website, ‘[t]he Red-Green Alliance was formed in 1989 by three left-wing parties: the Left Socialist Party, the Communist Party of Denmark and the Socialist Workers Party, and by independent socialists’ (<http://enhedslisten.dk/about-party>). The six seats out of 179 in parliament dwindled to four at the recent election in November 2007.

<sup>8</sup> A paraphrase of Engel’s German paragraph heading “Repräsentation als Bedeutungsproduktion und Wirklichkeitskonstruktion” taken from her personal website on which parts of her dissertation are published. See [http://www.antkeengel.de/diss\\_text.html#einleitung](http://www.antkeengel.de/diss_text.html#einleitung).





attempting to mainstream gender and sexuality into the party's general discourse as well as into relevant law proposals and implement a politics of what we still refer to as solidarity and perspective. One might argue that a more proper designation would be “the Intersectionality Committee of the Danish Red-Green Alliance:” Rather than hurriedly taking a stand and adamantly sticking to it – a strategy that seems most efficient for attracting media attention – we endeavor to levitate over the problem; postponing closure as long as we can. Our leisurely pace reflects our resolve to include race, class, religion, nationality, and physical abledness – as well as their mutual construction and interaction – in our provisional conclusions. Needless to say, bearing *all* these factors in mind at the same time is hardly ever possible, but even if we prove able to add only one more component to a particular case, it is still worth the effort.

### **Frustrated Independent Scholar Meets Queer Committee**

I will account for the historical background of the Committee by way of introduction.

As mentioned earlier, the Queer Committee was founded in 2002 by members of the Red-Green Alliance who felt that the age-old and still existent Women's Committee suffered from a heteronormative and essentialist bias when dealing with gender and sexuality. After asking for permission to form an alternative committee, the founding members posted an ad in *Panbladet*, the monthly bulletin of the National Association of Gays & Lesbians (known as LBL in Danish). The magazine was distributed to all gay venues throughout the country and thus also reached a public outside the Association.<sup>9</sup>

At that point, i.e. a couple of months after right-wing Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen – re-elected for the third time in November 2007 – had taken office for the first time, I had given up on parliamentarism entirely. Besides, I found it hard to imagine how Judith Butler's vision of a politics based on contingent foundations rather than on political subjects might be realized. I read the ad for the Queer Committee thinking, ‘Hmm... These guys are actually going to give it a try! As revolutionary socialists and feminists, they wish to overturn the

<sup>9</sup> For financial reasons, however, the magazine had to close down in November 2007. An online version remains available at <http://www.panbladet.dk>.



existing social order!?! Kindly asking for permission to be included on the terms of the establishment doesn't seem to be their thing? Might the master's tools be able to dismantle the master's house after all?'<sup>10</sup> After pondering these questions for some time, I decided to embark on their experiment, although I was not even a member of the party.

Contrary to most other committees within the Red-Green Alliance, this one immediately attracted a relatively large number of non-party members. Some of them were academics like myself or academics-to-be who had been identifying as socialists all along, but who had no experience working within the framework of a political party. Others were LGBT activists, while others yet were affiliated with radical left-wing initiatives like *Ungdomshuset*<sup>11</sup> or feminist grassroots groupings... or all of the above. In short, the Queer Committee is the closest I have ever come to witnessing and participating in 'the mutual interdependencies of social movements and academic theories'<sup>12</sup> – to the point where the definitional boundaries between the two dissolve. Thanks to ØQ, I have often left the Red-Green Alliance's gigantic first floor apartment contemplating academic theories that had been *refined* rather than simplified in the course of my evening there. And characteristically, my sporadic academic output is very often prompted by discussions and experiences shared by my ØQ comrades.

We spent the first years basically justifying our existence within the Red-Green Alliance – often wondering if we should just call it quits and form our own faction independent of any political party. When the Swedish *Feministiskt Initiativ* was launched in April 2005, some of us seriously considered whether the Queer Committee should copy their concept and do something similar. For several reasons, however, we decided not to. Denmark badly needed – and still does – a strong opposition rather than increased sectarianism, and being socialists we failed to grasp how FI would make “feminism” rhyme with “conservatism,” having outspoken right-wing

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<sup>10</sup> I owe this phrase to Audre Lorde's famous essay by the same name.

<sup>11</sup> Activists were evicted on March 1, 2007, and the building demolished a few days later, causing massive riots to erupt. Please see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ungdomshuset> for a thorough recapitulation of events. At the peaceful *Aktion G13* demonstration on October 6 later that year, several marchers from the Queer Committee joined the Yellow Queer Feminist Block and were subsequently arrested for unlawful entry onto municipal property as they tried to squat an empty building. The truck transporting the sound system for this particular block was decorated with banners such as 'Not gay as in happy, but queer as in critical.' See <http://aktiong13.dk/index.php>. See also overleaf photo of the front banner, 'Normalize this.'

<sup>12</sup> A quote from the call for papers for this special issue of GJSS on queer studies: methodological approaches. See <http://www.gjss.org/index.php/cfp>.



members on their board. Finally, our rejection of the belief in a universal female subject played an important part in this decision.

### **National Association of Gays & Lesbians Meets Queer Committee**

I will return to the obstacles encountered by the Queer Committee *inside* the Red-Green Alliance. First, however, the battles in which we have participated vis-à-vis various developments and events *outside* of the party deserve mention. Consisting of a large number of non-party members, the Committee spends a great deal of time and energy operating on “street level.” We are extremely committed to consciousness-raising efforts in the LGBT and anti-fascist communities, and predictably these efforts often lead to sword-crossings with the National Association of Gays & Lesbians (LBL).

One symptomatic public disagreement was over the inclusion of transgendered individuals in the Association in 2006. Although the Association’s name does not yet reflect this change, bisexuals *were* in fact included a few years ago. Hence, LBL made it to the LGB stage. Advancing to the *T*, however, seemed premature to the majority of the decision-makers, who moreover expressed their concern that the Association would have nothing to offer transgender people – the ‘categorical difference between homosexuals and transsexuals’ (Hinge 2006: 13) considering. The Queer Committee had the audacity to point out that even on the Association’s own terms – identity politics – this exclusion made no sense: There is living proof that the categories “gay” and “transsexual” are not mutually exclusive. Antke Engel’s words on representation as “meaning making” and “reality construction” are sadly applicable: The National Association of Gays & Lesbians performed a speech act and *made* the categories mutually exclusive by questioning transgender inclusion.

We then urged the opponents of the inclusion to subject their own rhetoric and logic to the so-called “Jew test:” A criterion of political correctness (in the good sense!) contrived by the Danish anthropologist and newspaper editor Anne Knudsen. Although the assumption that different instances of oppression and marginalization are immediately translatable across time



and place is questionable, this maneuver does work to illustrate by way of analogy whether an argument has fascist connotations. Inserting “Jew” instead of the minority you are discussing will sometimes yield quite startling results. In an article published in *Panbladet* in November 2006, one of the executive members writes, ‘Acknowledging that a small group of people feels and thinks differently does [not] entail that we have to give up our own gendered identity’<sup>13</sup> (Hinge 2006: 13). If that sentence were about Jews, my guess is that it would be considered paranoid. The argument would go something like, ‘They don’t believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but that doesn’t mean that *we* can’t continue to think so.’ One is left to wonder what made Hinge think that including gender non-conformists *might* have necessitated a renunciation of his own gendered identity?

Although we do have members identifying as transgender, the Queer Committee is not criticizing the Association *in the capacity of* a transgender organization asking for admission and taking offense because they refuse to let us in. Rather, what we protested was the Association’s disavowal of any connection between sexual desire and gendered self-perception and expression. The allegation that gender trouble and homosexuality are in no way related seems like a weird version of internalized homophobia – and overt transphobia. The Association’s logic seems to be something like, ‘We homosexuals are *real* men and women! Not the *false* ones getting gay-bashed for expressing gender ambiguity! Don’t come any closer lest it’s contagious!’

First time round, a decision on unconditional inclusion of transgender persons was postponed for two years. The Association’s annual convention did *allow* its members to take transsexuals into account when dealing with a gay-political issue which might affect transsexuals as well, but that was as far as they were willing to go. On the Association’s extraordinary general meeting on February 16, 2008, however, a proposal to rank transgender persons among the identities whose interests the Association should work to serve was finally passed.

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<sup>13</sup> One must assume that the author (or possibly the sloppy editor?) accidentally left out the “not.” Readers subscribing to psychoanalysis might be tempted to call it a “Freudian slip?”



## Pride and Prejudice

The Queer Committee's relation to the annual Gay Pride Parade is similarly strained. The Copenhagen Pride (at one point – in 2003 – actually called “Danish (Mermaid) Pride”) purports to be apolitical. However, we find it highly political that Pride Week concludes in a church service, signaling normative assumptions of a shared religious background. Truth to be told, the organizers *did* officially invite the Queer Committee to contribute to the program. If we wanted more politics, we were informed, *we* could be it! Thus, we were more than welcome to, as they put it, ‘show up, be angry, and shout “Fuck you!”’ Needless to say, we declined.

Instead, we handed out flyers<sup>14</sup> to the cheerful marchers on the day of the actual parade, i.e. August 13, 2005. The flyers featured four headlines: 1) ‘Diversity is only for those rich enough to pay for it’ – addressing the galloping consumerism characteristic of a Pride sponsored by expensive champagne brands and exclusive hotels, 2) ‘Homophobia wasn’t invented by Muslims’ – encouraging marchers to acknowledge that hate crimes against Muslims and homosexuals follow the same logic, namely hatred of deviation from the norm, 3) ‘No oppression can be understood isolated – the struggles are connected’ – refusing inclusion as “just as normal” and calling for a subversion of the system that privileges certain groups of people at the expense of others, and, finally, 4) ‘Does this make you feel normal?’ – summing up how economic inequality, racism, and discrimination in terms of gender and sexuality intertwine and that a queer perspective will reveal and combat this mechanism. The organizers would probably have preferred the ‘Fuck you’ contribution.<sup>15</sup>

As should have become apparent, a politics of contingent foundations is not only a potential alternative to business-as-usual representational politics – it is already being

<sup>14</sup> Visible at [http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/10.jpg/image\\_view\\_fullscreen](http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/10.jpg/image_view_fullscreen).

<sup>15</sup> Two years later they avenged our impudence by printing the accusation that ‘the Red-Green Alliance had organized demonstrations on account of the parade on several occasions.’ This libel – among others – was reprinted in the online version of the official Pride publication *CPH Proud* at <http://www.copenhagenpride.dk/files/cphproud.pdf>. The Queer Committee responded by issuing a press release (see <http://queer.dk/presse/29-08-2007>) and asking an MP to make the Pride organizers publish a retraction. Much to our chagrin, this never happened.



successfully realized. One need not *be* poor, Muslim, or culturally unintelligible as a gay person to subscribe to the headlines mentioned above.

### **Dyke Attack – Theorizing Homophobia and Unequal Pay after Dark**

So far it may seem as though the Queer Committee picks most of its fights with groupings that might have been our allies. However, we are just as vigorously involved in activities directed at heteronormative institutions and developments.

We feel particularly proud of a happening we organized in September 2004 called Dyke Attack<sup>16</sup> – simultaneously thematizing unequal pay, camouflaged prostitution, and homophobia.

Earlier that year, a member of the committee had been kicked out of a mainstream straight disco for kissing another woman. The two women were told that this behavior did not appeal to the patrons, largely consisting of – one must assume? – heterosexual men paying an entrance fee *six* times as high as the one asked of their female counterparts. Once the admission had been paid, all guests could drink for free. As the reader might imagine, it makes it considerably harder to insist on a rejection of his advances knowing that the guy beside you just bled 40 Euros whereas *you* got in by paying a modest 7.

The grapevine made sure that at 1 a.m. sharp that night, the approximately 40 women we had summoned were ready to take over the dance floor and kiss. At first, some of the audience seemed to find this rather titillating, but after about 2 minutes – which is when they realized that the scene was solely for the purpose of satisfying the hungry participants’ own deviant desires – they clearly felt threatened. Some of the crowd even fled to the rest rooms to seek refuge from the hordes of what was clearly perceived to be a menace. Forty women were more than the two bouncers could handle so we managed to stay till closing time and literally emptied the bar! Having smuggled in a journalist from national public radio, we subsequently added insult to injury as she “outed” the owner’s homophobia in her commentary a couple of days later. A

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<sup>16</sup> See the flyer here: [http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/8.jpg/image\\_view\\_fullscreen](http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/8.jpg/image_view_fullscreen).



feature article<sup>17</sup> by one participant was moreover circulated nation-wide in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*.

### **Right-Wing Majority Meets Queer Committee**

Although I have aired a certain discontent with the Red-Green Alliance, the Queer Committee also works *for* the party. During the election campaign in January 2005, we produced three flyers saying,

- 1) 'Stop homophobia in school – stress hampers learning!'<sup>18</sup> – hinting at the ongoing attempts to cast second-generation immigrants as the pupils both experiencing and causing learning difficulties,
- 2) 'Who's throwing stones? Fight racism and homophobia!'<sup>19</sup> – a comment on the “stone-throwing episode” in 2001, when a couple of teenagers – allegedly of an ethnic minority background – threw stones at the Copenhagen Pride Parade (and what was referred to as “the Muslim countries” received a homophobia prize). This incident paved the way for a discursive shift in Denmark: All of a sudden, xenophobic political parties joined forces with mainstream gays and lesbians, alleging that homophobia was an import from Muslim countries, and
- 3) 'Stop the heterofication of public space – you have a right to choose for yourself'<sup>20</sup> – a caustic remark on the then-recent removal of shrubbery in the famous gay male cruising area H C Ørstedsparken. Local politicians had argued that the park should be accessible to “ordinary citizens,” thus revealing that cruising men were not considered part of this category. As a response, some of us went on a nocturnal expedition to protest against the shrubbery removal putting up flyers everywhere in the park; another happening intended to criticize heteronormativity.

<sup>17</sup> Nordentoft, R.J. (2004) 'Forbudte kys' ('Forbidden Kisses'). *Politiken* October 22, 2004: 9. My translation.

<sup>18</sup> [http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/2.jpg/image\\_view\\_fullscreen](http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/2.jpg/image_view_fullscreen).

<sup>19</sup> [http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/4.jpg/image\\_view\\_fullscreen](http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/4.jpg/image_view_fullscreen).

<sup>20</sup> [http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/3.jpg/image\\_view\\_fullscreen](http://queer.dk/galleri/plakater-flyers/3.jpg/image_view_fullscreen).





Although the Prime Minister remained in office, the party gained two additional seats in parliament that year. Of course we would be kidding ourselves if we were to believe that *we* caused this progress. However, our so-called “queer battle of politicians” did attract an impressive amount of people – the place was packed – so at least we made a decent contribution in the Copenhagen district.

### **Queer Questions – Round Two**

Taking a stand on equal opportunity initiatives is one of the most interesting dilemmas the Queer Committee has ever faced: How can you be *for* affirmative action and *against* representational politics at the same time? At the annual convention of the Red-Green Alliance in 2004, we proposed that the statute sentence ‘each gender occupies at least 40% of the seats in the governing body’ be replaced by ‘the two conventional genders each occupy 40% of the seats in the governing body. The remaining 20% are distributed between those left.’<sup>21</sup> Our motivation ran as follows,

The original wording does not consider the individuals who are not identified as and/or do not identify as “men” or “women.” The phrase “the two conventional genders” serves to emphasize that we do not subscribe to the supposition that biology implies certain qualifications. Regardless of which proposal will be passed, we wish to submit the following amendment: “Proposal xx on affirmative action shall be accompanied by concrete initiatives on local division/committee level – for instance presentations on master suppression techniques and subsequent discussion – and similar initiatives aiming at dismantling traditional gender structures and power distribution. To ensure a diverse recruitment base, change must be brought about bottom-up. Challenging gendered power structures is a responsibility that we all share. In other words, it is not the obligation of

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<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, the text below is the only English translation of the proposal. The Danish original is accessible at the following URL: <http://queer.dk/politik/uddybende/forslag-om-konskvotering>.





the underprivileged to “fight their way up” on their own (non-paginated gender quota proposal).

As to why the Queer Committee supported gender quotas as such, we explained to the delegates that

even if we did not feel that women by definition represent particular values, continued inertia with regard to the current unequal distribution of seats would be tantamount to maintaining inequality and democratic deficit. The status quo reflects an invisible gender quota favoring men. We believe in making this distribution of power visible in order to change it. We are working toward reducing the significance of gender in the long run, but the current social order<sup>22</sup> does not allow us to ignore the fact that – as of yet – men and women respectively are not given the same opportunities to act (non-paginated gender quota proposal)

At first glance, this may look like a conventional representational stance – indeed, this was the framework we were offered to work within. However, promoting a governing board mirroring the percentage of women and gender non-conformists in society at large was not the sole purpose of our intervention. Bearing Antke Engel’s definition of “representation” in mind, we were also hoping that a side effect of our proposal might be an increase of discursive alternatives to future generations. To cut a long story short: Our ambitions exceeded *reflecting* diversity; we were also trying to *facilitate* it by means of role models. Equal opportunity means distributing opportunity equally, but it also means enabling subjects with unpredictable skill combinations to come into existence in the first place. Only this way may affirmative action render itself superfluous in the long run.

Ironically, our proposal was interpreted – by the party itself as well as by the indie media present – as a wish to reserve 20% of the seats for *homosexuals*. In this instance, Butler’s question ‘whether social strategies of regulation, abjection, and normalization will not continue

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Swedish feminist Nina Björk that ‘[a]ny cultural analysis disregarding gender will only be relevant in a society similarly disinterested in gender. That description does not fit our current society’ (Björk 2000: 267).



to relink gender and sexuality such that the oppositional analysis will continue to be under pressure to theorize their interrelations' (Butler 1993: 240) proved painfully pertinent.

This rather unexpected interpretation illustrates that although great pains may be taken when devising *expressions* of political thought, the *reception* of these expressions can prove very difficult to predict, let alone control. Hegemonic discourse does not always allow recipients to recognize what all the effort is about. Quite possibly, this problem ranks among the most severe impediments to getting queer points across: Normative reception may cast our political message as unintelligible, counterproductive, immature, or something entirely different that in no way reflects our intentions.

The paradigmatic misunderstanding of the gender quota proposal provides a nice transition to my concluding remarks on what is often experienced as the repressive tolerance of the party to which the Queer Committee belongs. For instance, the Red-Green Alliance chose to describe us as their 'network for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals' in the day planner distributed to all party members, even though it says loud and clear on our index page [queer.dk](http://queer.dk) that we are not. On top of this, we had to put up with the description in the 2006 organizational analysis of all committees in the party that *our* committee 'also attracts persons whose interest is of an identitarian nature' (as opposed to all the other committees mentioned, presumably?) We plan to react by referring the authors to the presentations on master suppression techniques offered by the Queer Committee.

### **Parliament Meets Queer Committee**

To end on a much more optimistic note, I will conclude with a story of success and embrace. In January 2006, the Queer Committee organized a hearing on transgender legislation. We invited all the transgender associations we could think of to provide feedback on our draft of general



principles that should inform a law proposal<sup>23</sup> on the issue. Subsequently, an MP incorporated our recommendations and put forward the proposal in parliament on March 30, 2007.

This proposal, by the way, is our prime accomplishment when it comes to devising a politics of contingent foundations rather than one of identity. As is the case in many other countries, the Danish Personal Identification Number (a.k.a. PIN) reveals whether “male” or “female” was assigned to the holder at birth. Instead of settling for transsexuals’ right to change their PIN prior to sex reassignment surgery – although we strongly support this right! – we propose that the PIN lose its gender specificity entirely. We are not staking this claim *as or for the sake of* neither transsexuals nor women. Rather, it rests on our conviction that PIN numbers help discursively *produce* subjects as men and women respectively.

We can only guess whether the MP actually grasped the anti-identitarian implications of adopting a paragraph phrased by the Queer Committee. Be that as it may, our popularity within the party all of a sudden increased dramatically. For instance, the editors of the bimonthly party bulletin *Rød-Grønne Linjer* devoted an entire page to the proposal in mid-April of 2007 and confessed that they had been trying to “sell the story” to one of the free daily newspapers with a circulation of 500,000 copies.

In other words, I am starting to wonder if the recurring misinterpretations of Queer Committee ideology and operations will *remain* paradigmatic. Will repressive tolerance eventually give way to curiosity and the willingness to learn, as we like to fantasize about? Only time will tell. To quote from Butler, ‘fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside’ (Butler 2004: 29).

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<sup>23</sup> The proposal (in Danish) is available at the official website of the Danish parliament: <http://www.folketinget.dk/doc.aspx?/Samling/20061/beslutningsforslag/B142/index.htm>. The Queer Committee's input can be downloaded as a Word document at [http://queer.dk/politik/uddybende/Udkast til personnummerpolitik.doc](http://queer.dk/politik/uddybende/Udkast%20til%20personnummerpolitik.doc).



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Front banner of the Yellow Queer Feminist Block. Photo by Andreas Jensen/Monsun ([http://www.modkraft.dk/spip.php?page=nyheder-artikel&id\\_article=6345](http://www.modkraft.dk/spip.php?page=nyheder-artikel&id_article=6345))



'Stop the heterofication of public space – you have a right to choose for yourself!

Red-Green Alliance – we want more than marriage and kids!'

Cyber advertisement from the election campaign in 2005.

The Queer Committee's logo is on the left, the Red-Green Alliance's opposite.



Michela Baldo  
 University of Manchester  
 michelabaldo@yahoo.co.uk

### **Queer in Italian-North American women writers**

#### Abstract

*This article seeks to investigate the meaning of the term queer in the post-migratory setting of Italian-Canadian and Italian-North American women writers, and constitutes thus a contribution to recent studies which project the notion of queer within a diasporic framework. Specifically, it aims at analysing the ways in which the term has been recontextualised in this transnational context with reference to issues of ethnicity. Within cultural theory the concepts of 'queer' and 'diaspora' have been informed by post-modern and post-colonial theory and have intervened on theories of time, space and identity infusing them with notions of transgression, contingency, power and conflict.*

*This study is based on the analysis of excerpts taken from short stories and poems in *Curraggia: Writings by Women of Italian Descent*, an anthology edited by three second generation Italian/Canadian lesbian and feminist writers (as they define themselves), published in 1998 by Women Press, a publishing house based in Toronto. Through these and other literary excerpts written by the same writers I would like to implement some previous studies (Fortier 1999, 2001, 2003; Gopinath 2003, 2005; Ahmed 2003, 2006) on the concept of queer in diasporic contexts.*

#### **1. Queer diasporas**

Any discussion on how the concept of **queer** has been manipulated and used outside the British context needs to start from the very significance of the concept. Queer is believed to have been popularly adopted in the early 1990s and is a product of increasing debates around the question of lesbian and gay identities. However, as an intellectual model, queer has been produced not only by lesbian and gay politics and theory, but has been informed by other post-modern theoretical discourses which constitute late twentieth century western thought. In opposition to lesbian and gay studies' notions of identity politics, which assumed identity as the necessary prerequisite for political intervention (Jagose 1996: 77), queer politics is based on 'a more mediated relation to categories of identification'. The awareness that gay life has often generated its own disciplinary regimes, in the form of obligatory haircuts, t-shirts and dietary practices, for example, has led in the past few years to a deeper understanding of how too rigid categories of gay and lesbian have risked reinforcing the same heterosexuality they tried to oppose (Jagose 1996: 92-93). Such a risk was and still is due to the discursive

structures and representational systems that determine the production of sexual meaning which are informed by dominant discourses which seek to maintain and reproduce the heterosexist privilege (Jagose 1996: 92). Deeper awareness of this risk was provided by Foucault (1981), who understood sexuality as a cultural category and not an essentially personal attribute, and Butler (1990), who stated that gender is a cultural fiction, a performative effect of reiterative acts. These post-structuralist scholars have challenged the notion of a stable and fixed identity which was at risk of working against those constituents it claimed to represent. Queer theory offers an alternative to previous understandings since it conceives gender and sexuality as fluid, unstable and in motion.

Thus, the poststructuralist understanding of identity as provisional and contingent has enabled queer to emerge as a new form of personal and political identification (Jagose 1996: 77-78). Queer politics, by promoting a politics of difference as opposed to one of identity, has also provided a critique of the causal relationship between a secure identity and an effective politics. Such a politics is not based on whom we are and to our similarities to a group but on experiences of oppression and desire as a means of collective political affiliation. It involves a continual evolution and questioning of the spaces that we occupy in order to fully explore the possibilities of sexual becoming; it relies on respect for the multiplicity of identities, sexualities and forms of relationships that people discover in their lives (Davis 2005: 26).

Queer theory is thus an ambiguous theory given its fundamental indeterminacy and its commitment to denaturalisation, in the footsteps of Butler's (1990) separation of categories of gender and sexuality, and Foucault's (1980) critique of natural sex. Since queer evades programmatic description, it has been used in a variety of ways, and has consequently been valued differently in different contexts (Jagose 1996: 98). It can be, for example, a synonym for lesbian and gay or less often 'lesbian, gay and bisexual' (Goldman 1996: 173); it can be used as a fashionable rather than theoretical term as can be seen in some of the mobilisations of 'Queer nation'<sup>1</sup> against the threat of poststructuralism to the political gains of lesbian and

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<sup>1</sup> Queer Nation was an organization founded in March 1990 in New York City, USA by AIDS activists. The founders were outraged at the escalation of anti-gay and lesbian violence on the streets and prejudice in the arts and media. Queer Nation's popular slogan "***We're here. We're queer. Get used to it.***" was adopted and used by many in the LGBT community. Aside from its militant protest style, as opposed to the more reformist gay rights organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign or the Log Cabin Republicans, Queer Nation was most effective and powerful in the early 1990s in the USA, and used direct action to fight for gay rights. Queer Nation is credited with starting the process of reclaiming the word queer, which, previously, was only used in a pejorative sense and Queer Nation's use of it in their name and slogan was at first considered shocking ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer\\_Nation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_Nation)).

gay battles. In this context queer serves, for example, to distinguish old-style lesbians and gays from the new ones. Ultimately, the term can be employed to describe an anti-normative positioning with regards to sexuality. Although queer has tended to occupy a predominantly sexual register, recently its denaturalising project has spread to categories of identification other than sex and gender (Jagose 1996: 99).

The notion of queer, as shown, has been exploited in different ways and risks being turned into an umbrella that includes everything, even contradictory perspectives, and therefore eventually erases the very diversity that queer tries to highlight (Goldman 1996: 170). My understanding of queer in the present discussion moves mainly from its acknowledgment of identity as unfixed and multivalent and from its resistance to whatever constitutes the norm. With regard to the first point, in saying that queer identity is not fixed we affirm that it might not always occupy the same space and thus that it is in motion; in saying that it is multivalent and against the norm we affirm that it should do more than simply signalling an alternative sexuality, rather it should offer a way to analyse the expression of our many intersecting selves, it should be structured around the blurring and interconnection of identities (Goldman 1996: 173) cutting across race, gender, sex and ethnicity. Queer speaks of diversity within unity, and points towards inclusion rather than exclusion, of all those identities which are subversive and anti-norm. These two characteristics have the potential of making queer theory applicable to a wider range of phenomena by including categories such as race and ethnicity, which for so long have been silenced in queer theory. This potential is realised through the notion of diaspora, which, in the Italian-Canadian context analysed in the present paper, is metaphorically linked, although in problematic terms, to ethnicity.

**Diaspora** derives from the Greek *dia* (through) and *sperein* (to scatter) and hence is “a dispersion from”: it invokes the concept of a locus, of a *home*, from which the dispersion occurs. However, if diaspora invokes concepts of the trauma of separation and dislocation, these traumas are also potentially ‘the sites of hope and new beginnings’, they are terrain where ‘memories reassemble and reconfigure’ to form new homes and new spaces (Brah 1996: 193). Diaspora thus signifies a site, a space (Brah 1996: 194) located between the global and the local where new landscapes of identities are negotiated. Processes of diasporic identity formation show that ‘identity is always plural, and in process’ (Brah 1996: 197). Within postcolonial theory diaspora refers to multilocality, post-nationality, non-linearity of space and time. From a transnational and intercultural perspective, and in opposition to



exclusive ethnic approaches to migration, ‘the term converses with other terms such as border, transculturation, travel, creolisation, metizaje, hybridity’ (Gilroy 1993, 1994 quoted in Fortier 2001: 406).

By analysing a diasporic phenomenon such as that of the Italian-Canadian/North American women writers, my article seeks therefore to expand the sometimes limited horizons of queer, by adding the identity categories of ethnic, revisited in light of the new understanding of diaspora, without, however, discarding the importance of sexuality. Such an analysis is apparent in recent studies (Fortier 1999; 2001; 2003; Gopinath 2003; 2005; Ahmed 2003; 2006) which have projected queer culture and politics within a diasporic framework, in an attempt to exploit the potentialities of queer theory. Some of these studies have concentrated on questioning or queering the notion of home, attachment and belonging in diasporic communities (Fortier 1999; 2001; 2003), others have paid attention to questions of nation, ethnicity and family and on how diasporic subjects seem perennially outside the confines of these entities (Gopinath 2003 : 140); and others have directed their interest towards queer phenomenology as a way of questioning the idea of sexual orientation towards objects in space and time and as a way of questioning the racialisation of space, therefore focussing on post-modern diasporic understandings of space and time (Ahmed 2006).

My study starts from the idea of movement, of being ‘out of place’ or moving between spaces and times, an attribute that both queer and diaspora share in their revisited forms. This idea is also fundamental in the present paper because it is strongly connected, in the narrative constructions of Italian-Canadian/North-American women writers, to questions of displacement as a form of translation.

## **2. *Curraggia* and the Italian-North American writing context**

The idea for *Curraggia* was developed during an initial discussion, in 1990, between Nzula Angelina Ciatu<sup>2</sup>, a lesbian poet, and Domenica DiLeo<sup>3</sup>, a lesbian political activist and writer

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<sup>2</sup> Nzula Angelina Ciatu is a feminist writer of Sicilian mixed-race origin. Her work, published in many anthologies and journals, reflects on race politics, ethnic identity, class consciousness, sexuality and gender’ (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 354).

<sup>3</sup> Domenica DiLeo is writer of Southern Italian origin (Calabria region) living in Toronto. She has been involved with Women’s Press *Fireweed* and with *Effe*, an Italian feminist publication. She is a member of *Avanti*, an

(they were later joined by Gabriella Micallef<sup>4</sup>, a lesbian film director) about their experience of growing up in Italian working class families trying to make sense of their identity as Italian-Canadian women. The outcome of this and other following discussions was the desire to use their own experience in feminist organisations to reach out to other Italian women, to provide a space for them to represent their diversity. Although the three editors are Italian-Canadian, the writers who contributed to the anthology are not only Canadian (although Canadians constitute the majority of the contributors) but also North American, mainly from the Northern states of the US. The title of the anthology is in Southern Italian dialect and stands for ‘courage’. Although the Southern Italian word is masculine: ‘curraggio’, it is turned into a feminine term by adding the vowel “a” at the end, in line with the spirit of this literary work. *Curraggia* is an invocation to all Italian women to be brave, speak out and narrate their experiences (as translated literally in the expression ‘Let’s be brave’) as explained by Di Leo (1998: 15): ‘I laugh at the courage that we as Italian women have always had and continue to have in all the forms that shaped our lived experiences’. The same principle is found in another recent anthology of writing collected by Maria Coletta McLean in 2004, *Mamma Mia. Good Italian Girls Talk Back*, which is comprised of eighteen short stories by Italian-Canadian women writers. Although the title of this second anthology caused great controversy, and the first editor, Gina Valle, breached her contract with the publishing house ECW because she did not agree with it, it seems that behind both enterprises lies a will to contest the norm, to queer common assumptions regarding ethnic women and to oppose various forms of oppression.

This determination is part of a double project which aims at challenging stereotypes circulating in North-America about women of Italian descent as obedient wives and selfless, giving mothers, but also to combat cultural and familial codes such as ‘omertà’ (a Southern Italian term which stands for cultural silence) which prevented these women, for example, from talking about sexuality or incest/abuse they had experienced within their Southern Italian families (Ciatu 1998a: 19). The editors of *Curraggia* wanted women living in North-

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Italian Lesbian and Gay social support group and *Voce Alternativa*, an Italian feminist group. Her writing revolves around issues of family and community. Her published poetry includes *Gay Pride Day* and *Cigars and Cigarettes* (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 354-355).

<sup>4</sup> Gabriella Micallef is a lesbian feminist of Sicilian and Maltese descent living in Toronto. She is a film and video director/producer extremely active in anti-oppression work and in community development (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 357-358).

America who identified themselves as Italian to talk about ‘their isolation, violations, fascinations’ and ‘to speak about the least spoken, to say the least said’ (Micallef 1998: 21).

Many of the short stories and poems of *Curraggia* explore the cultural and sexual identities of Italian North American/Canadian women who transgressed the rules of their ethnic community and became estranged from their families as a result. Transgressing those rules could simply mean not being married, as expressed in the verses of Adriana Suriano (1998: 36) in the poem ‘Coupled’: ‘I am the shameful one who sleeps without a wedding band, wakes up with my maiden name, signs my own rent checks’; or it could refer to having a more Anglo-Canadian style of life, dating men without wanting to commit to marriage for example, as expressed by Francesca Schembri (1998a: 29) in the poem ‘Meglio Morta che Disonorata’ (translated: ‘Better dead than without honour’) in which a daughter talks to her mother: ‘We do not want to be married. Figlia che disgrazia, ma come fai a guardarmi in faccia<sup>5</sup>’, and as expressed in ‘Hyphenated identities’, also by Francesca Schembri (1998b: 103-109), in which the protagonist blames herself for having been forced, by the Italian extended family, to hate and reject her daughter because of her teenage pregnancy outside marriage.

Given these considerations, it is not surprising that a self-definition of these women as lesbian or bisexual was encountered with even more hostility, since it endangered the Italian family structure, based on patriarchal hetero-normativity. Because of a homophobic Italian Catholic culture, strengthened as a consequence of immigration to Canada and North America due to a desire to preserve the family institution in a hostile land, there has been a widespread tendency in these women to completely separate ethnic and queer spaces and lives (Fortier 1999: 3). There is the notion that being lesbian/bisexual/queer cannot coexist with being Italian, hence the uncomfortable split between homosexuality and ethnicity. The anthology is thus an attempt to come to terms with this split, a split which is expressed by Nzula Angelina Ciatu, a co-editor of the anthology with the following words (1998a: 17): ‘What I could not be in my Sicilian community was lesbian and feminist. What I could rarely express, in either the Italian or feminist communities, were the complexities of my mixed-racial heritage’. The same idea is invoked by Francesca Di Cuore (1998: 114) in ‘Leaving Home: Reflections of a

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<sup>5</sup> My translation of the Italian verses is as follows: ‘My daughter, you wretch! How do you to look me in the face again?’

Catholic Lesbian’: ‘I was a daughter of the patriarchy and it demanded heterosexuality; it would not allow me to pursue my love without guilt and shame’.

The concept of queer, even though this term is not always used in the anthology, pervades the majority of the stories and poems, as there is a general attempt to break silences, to challenge normative beliefs around women sexuality and to look at them in a new light.

In order to better understand the spirit of the anthology, it is useful to consider *Curraggia* as part of the broader context of Italian- North American writing as it shares much with other Italian-North American anthologies<sup>6</sup> and writings, such as the afore-mentioned *Mamma Mia. Good Italian Girls Talk Back*’ (McLean 2004) and *Hey Paesan. Writing by Lesbian and Gay of Italian Descent* (Capone et al. 1999) which features some of the writers of *Curraggia*. Some of these writers have also written in *Fuori. Essays by Italian-American lesbian and gays* (Tamburri 1996) – Janet Capone for example – or have published other books on the concept of queer, as has Anna Camilleri.<sup>7</sup>

Generally speaking, this writing inserts itself within the broader phenomenon of Italian-Canadian writing, a body of literature produced in the last thirty years by writers of Italian background living in Canada. This literature began in about 1975 with the work of Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, who was also one of the founders, in 1986, in Vancouver of the Association of Italian-Canadian writers (Pivato 1994). Although the majority of the women writing in *Curraggia* do not belong to this association (with the exception of a very few), their work shares similarities of style and content with writing by the authors of this association. The authors of *Curraggia*, like other popular Italian-Canadian women writers such as Mary Di Michele<sup>8</sup>, Mary Melfi<sup>9</sup>, Caterina Edwards<sup>10</sup>, Darlene Maddott<sup>11</sup> are preoccupied with

<sup>6</sup> The Italian-Canadian writer Dino Minni states that the short story genre, which is featured mostly in anthologies, is typically an ethnic genre, since it often deals with marginal people (1985: 63-64).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Camilleri is a queer femme writer, video artist and performer, currently living in Toronto. She is a member of Taste this, an interdisciplinary performance troupe which toured the west coast extensively and has produced a collection of fictions. She is the co-editor of *Brazen Femme* (Arsenal Pulp Press), a collection of essays and poems about reinterpreting what it means to identify as femme; author of *I Am a Red Dress* (Arsenal Pulp Press), a graceful narrative about recovery, family and identity; and leading lady in *Sounds Siren Red*, a one-woman show that combines monologue, poetry and performance to break down and rebuild the image of the archetypal woman. Her latest anthology, *Red Light: Superheroes, Saints and Sluts* (Arsenal Pulp Press), is a thoughtful re-visioning of the female icon’s place in culture and history. Her extensive and creative questioning of identity and how it is expressed and interpreted contributes an original and necessary voice to queer/feminist dialogue (<http://www.curvemag.com/Detailed/642.html>).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Di Michele is a Canadian poet, novelist and teacher. Born in Lanciano (Italy) in 1949, she emigrated to Canada with her family in 1955. With *Mimosa and Other Poems* (1981), a series of monologues between two daughters and their immigrant father, she became a major voice among the growing numbers of Italian-Canadian

issues such as patriarchy and the place of women within the family and the society at large. *Infertility Rites* (1991) by Mary Melfi, for example, shows how issues of motherhood and reproduction are entangled with notions of ethnic identity and assimilation (Verdicchio 1997: 54). However, the anthology *Curraggia* contains a large number of stories about female homosexuality, a topic which is not popular in Italian-Canadian writing, and that is missing, for example, in *Pillars of Lace. The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers* (1998), edited by the Italian-Canadian writer Marisa de Franceschi.<sup>12</sup>

This study therefore looks at *Curraggia* as a project with the courage of breaching this specific silence about same sex desire, along with other silences deriving from the difficulties of integrating different cultures, experienced by Italian immigrants in Canada.

The majority of Italian-Canadian writers were either born in Canada to Italian families (who had emigrated mainly from Southern Italy in the 1950s and 1960s) or arrived in Canada at an early age and grew up there. The compelling desire to write originated, according to them, from the necessity to solve and accommodate a generational conflict, the same conflict we observe in *Curraggia*. This conflict arises from splitting the self to account for opposing loyalties: the one faithful to Canadian values inculcated through formal education in English (self-promotion and individualism), and the other to Italian values (patriarchal roles and attachment to family, for example) which are taught at home through dialect or Italian (Pivato 1994: 124). Italian-Canadian writing thus explores a doubleness of identity experienced by second generation Italian immigrants and inevitably becomes an attempt to translate the Italian language of emotion into the Canadian-English sphere of consciousness in order to resolve and negotiate a linguistic and cultural conflict (Pivato 1994: 121-122). As stated by

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writers. In 1994, with the novel *Under my Skin*, she dealt with topics such as media, violence and identity. Her last novel, *Tenor of Love* (2005), deals with the life of the singer Caruso (Pivato 2007: 205-207).

<sup>9</sup> Mary Melfi was born in Campobasso (Italy) and came to Canada in 1956. She completed her studies at the University of Montreal and published many books in a variety of genres: *A Bride in Three Acts* (1983), *A Dialogue with Masks* (1985), *Infertility Rites* (1991) and *Stages: Selected Poems* (1998) (Pivato 1998: 374; Anselmi 2007: 7-18).

<sup>10</sup> Caterina Edwards was born in 1948 and has an Italian, Croatian, Welsh and English background. Her family emigrated to Canada in 1956 and she grew up in Calgary. With the publication of her first novel, *The Lion's Mouth*, in 1982, Caterina Edwards became the first Canadian writer to explore the life of an Italian immigrant woman in Western Canada. Her first play, *Terra Straniera* (1986) published under the title *Homeground*, examines the life of Italian immigrants. In her writings there is a strong desire to challenge narrative conventions in Canada (Pivato 2000: 119-121).

<sup>11</sup> Darlene Maddott is a Toronto lawyer and writer. She published in 1985 a collection of short stories, *Bottled Roses*. Her most recent work is a film script, *Mazzilli's Shoes* (Ciatu Nzula et al. eds. 1998: 357).

Pivato (1994: 127): ‘The most important task for Italian-Canadian writers has been the uncovering and translation of their immigrant experience as an act of self-discovery’.

The writing of *Curraggia*, like Italian-Canadian writing, revolves around a cultural and linguistic translation which is fundamental in this revisiting of the concept of queer. The preoccupation with translation is also evident in the preoccupation with genre. These writers experiment with and move across different genres constantly. Anna Camilleri and Mary Melfi, for example, transform their novels into plays or scripts for radio; others, like Mary Di Michele write novels as a way of paraphrasing their poetry while others still write essays and autobiographical non fiction (Domenica DiLeo, Mary Di Michele, Caterina Edwards), moving subsequently to poetry or novels and viceversa.

### 3. Translation, language and narrative

Translation in this context is viewed as a tool which enables the act of writing; it is a metaphorical tool of representation and is connected to language. For the authors of *Curraggia* language is an issue greatly discussed in the poems and short stories. One of these: ‘Nana’s Peaches’ by Carol Mottola Knox, is about the frustration, but also the humour, generated by the misunderstandings between a granddaughter and her Sicilian grandmother who cannot get her ‘pictures’ back from the drugstore because everybody else thinks she asked for ‘peaches’ (Mottola Knox 1998: 37).

The women of *Curraggia* talk therefore about miscommunication between generations and about the constant process of translation that seeks to enable communication. This condition is almost always signalled through the use of two or more languages (Standard Italian and Italian dialect) other than English in the same text (Pivato 1994). Such an interplay of languages expresses the linguistic and cultural negotiations at work in this post-immigrant society. Italian and Italian dialect are used in *Curraggia* (as in other Italian/Canadian/North American writing) mainly in the form of insertions of noun phrases or sentences related to Italian food, greetings and traditions. This phenomenon can be labelled

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<sup>12</sup> Marisa De Franceschi was born in Muris (Udine) Italy. She went to Canada in 1948 and grew up in Windsor (Ontario). Her short stories have appeared in a variety of publications and in a number of anthologies. *Surface Tension* (1995) is her first novel (De Franceschi ed. 1998).



codeswitching, a term taken from Linguistics which describes the phenomenon whereby a bi- or multilingual speaker in communities where two or more languages are in contact shifts from one language to another in the course of a conversation (Milroy and Mysken 1995: 7). In literature this device is not arbitrary, that is, it is not simply a mimetic device used to give the reader a flavour of the author's heritage language, but has a more symbolic function. In the case of Italian-Canadian writing it contributes to the portrayal of a group identity, since it can signal a character's perspective in terms of his or her emotions and attitudes (Martins 2005: 2). This signalling is possible because codeswitching 'reflects and creates focalisation' (Mätta 2004: 48). Focalisation is a concept from Film Studies<sup>13</sup>, and refers to the lens through which we see characters and events in narrative. Codeswitching, by juxtaposing two different cultural worlds, Italy and Canada, produces constant changes in focalisation, contributing not only to the polyphonic structure of this writing but to its competing ideologies.

Translation and multilingualism must be thus considered as complementary concepts and are not only linguistic but also political and cultural (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990). The increasing use of translation and other languages in fictional texts 'provides a comment about our social-cultural values and the state of the world we live in' (Delabastita and Grutman 2005: 13). In addition, more and more narratives not only draw on multilingualism but 'describe and fictionalise the encounters and struggles between continents and people' (Delabastita and Grutman 2005: 21) in which translation and multilingualism play a major role.

In *Curraggia* narrating and translating are effectively the same process, as the everyday linguistic and cultural translation undergone by these women takes the shape of a narrative which weaves and constructs their identity. The idea of narrative now circulating in some strands of the Social Sciences, and in the new poststructuralist approach to narratology, stresses the fact that identity is constituted and reconstituted in the process of narrating. According to Somers and Gibson: 'We come to know, understand and make sense of our social life through narratives, that is by locating ourselves in networks of relationships embedded in time and space' (Somers and Gibson 1994: 58-59). Space and time are core

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<sup>13</sup> Focalisation refers to 'the point behind the lens where the light rays from a point being photographed converge to form an image' and by extension also 'to the location from which a subject will record sharply on film'. It can also refer to 'the degree of sharpness and definition of the image' (Konisberg 1988: 133).

concepts in narratology and narrative theory and stress the importance of contextualisation in any analysis of social phenomena.

These two concepts are then fundamentally related to translation. Indeed the very word translation means to transfer, to move. It involves taking something away from a place and moving it into another space and in this sense it is linked to Migration Studies, which deal with phenomena such as displacement and resettlement. Italian-Canadian/North American writing is the product of a dis-placement, and as such it refers to something ‘other’ than the national, and responds both to the points of departure and of arrival (Verdicchio 1997: 110). Writing in the Italian-Canadian/North American scenario implies the concept of a movement which begins in itself and returns to itself mutated. This constant travelling of the mind opens up the possibility of reviewing things from a refreshing distance in order to avoid designating them and limiting them (Verdicchio 1997: 111).

Translation and writing/narrating in *Curraggia* aim thus at re-suturing the intergenerational gap opened up by emigration. The processes are connected to the concepts of space and time because they deal with movement both in history and from one country to another, but also because they ‘problematise the integrity and homogeneity of these categories by fictionalising different spaces and cultural realities within North American/Canadian boundaries’ (Beneventi 2004: 220). Here, space represents a physical terrain which is appropriated, negotiated by the immigrant or post-immigrant subject who ties that space up with his/her cultural specificity (Beneventi 2004).

Given these premises, the concept of translation and narrative seem to represent good metaphors for the concepts of queer and diasporas. Like translation and narrative, queer and diaspora involve the idea of a spatio/temporal transformation, a circular translation or movement between languages and cultures which produce new spaces and memories which eventually participate in new narrative-identity constructions.

#### **4. Queer diasporas as re-creation of home. Towards a notion of ‘transqueer’ narrative**

This section will provide an analysis of samples of writing from the anthology *Curraggia*, and from related books in which the term queer is employed, so that a better understanding of queer in the North American/Canadian context can be reached. In particular it aims to show



the importance of language as a way of enriching the understanding of this concept, along with the concept of translation and narrative as previously mentioned. Hence the term 'transqueer narrative' which sees queer as a form of translation.

A starting point for this discussion is the studies by Fortier (1999; 2001; 2003) on the notion of *home* in relation to diasporas, drawing on Brah's (1996) notion of *homing*. Home is specifically placed in relation to diaspora not simply because it represents the original place from which migration started, but because it involves a discourse of the reconstruction of home in the country of arrival. Diaspora is becoming home, 'it is the project whereby one participates in the new reality that the new arrival creates with the very act of arriving' (Harrison 1979: 87). Diaspora is therefore the condition which produces the writing of *Curraggia* (as product of the displacement of a wave of emigrants from Italy in the post-war period) and it is also the process of enacting 'homing desires' (Brah 1996: 180) so that one can feel at home in the new country.

The writers of *Curraggia* are a diasporic product; they are the outcome of their parents' or grandparents' emigration and have in some cases migrated themselves due to the impossibility of living in close knit ethnic families, since their 'unpopular sexual orientation means that they end up needing a certain amount of distance from their families' as Giovanna Capone<sup>14</sup>, a writer who contributed to the *Curraggia* collection, explains in *Fuori* (1996: 36). She says that as a result of moving from her family's city, New York, to San Francisco, home of a large lesbian and gay community in the US, she feels a divided person, 'torn in half': 'an Italian in New York and a lesbian in California' (Capone 1996: 36).

How many times have I been forced to choose under incredible painful conditions where my loyalties stand, and what *my* freedom encompasses? How many times have I wondered: to which "family" do I most belong, the lesbian/gay community of San Francisco, in which I've lived as an out lesbian for many years, or my Italian American family in New York, which is my ethnic base, the family into which I was born, but the family where I too often feel invisible and isolated as a lesbian? (Capone 1996: 37).

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<sup>14</sup> Giovanna (Janet) Capone is a lesbian poet and fiction writer of Neapolitan origins. She was raised in an Italian/American neighbourhood in New York. Her writings have appeared in various books including *Unsettling America: A Multicultural Poetry Anthology*, *The Voices we Carry: Recent Italian American Women's Fiction*, *Bless me Father: Stories of Catholic Childhood* and *Fuori: Essays by Italian/American Lesbians and Gays* (1996). She was one of the editors of the anthology *Hey Paesan: Writing by Lesbians and Gay Men of Italian Descent* (1999) (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 353).

The difficulty of having to deal with such an ‘inhuman choice’ between families, as Capone (1996: 36) puts it, is also expressed by another contributor to *Curraggia*, Anna Nobile<sup>15</sup>, in ‘Thicker than Water’ a short story in *Mamma Mia* (2004), where she claims that she was forced to emigrate to Vancouver from Toronto in order to live a true life.

I have travelled three thousand miles in order to live a life that is not a lie, which is filled with caring, likeminded people. From this distance, my mother can be proud of whatever “successes” I share with her, and the things she doesn’t want anyone else to know are easily hidden, denied. Any closer and her shame would be too much for me to bear. She would have to lie again. I could say that leaving behind a family that forced me to hide and deny myself for one that loves and embraces me has been worth the sacrifice, but the dulling of love with shame and guilt, absence and loss, has cost us both. I miss my mother and I believe she misses me as well (Nobile 2004: 99-100).

This painful split between family and ethnicity, as mentioned in section two, is thus, in some cases, the product not only of a metaphorical movement away from the family but also of a physical displacement. In both cases, there is a sense that this gap needs to be filled since the self cannot bear living in such a schizophrenic condition. Hence the need of these women to return home, re-imagine home. These queer diasporas do not involve movements away from an original home but rather the journey of returning home. As stated by Fortier (2003: 116): ‘Queer migrations are not merely *against* the childhood home but, rather [...] they *reprocess* the childhood home differently’. The focus is not simply on childhood homes as coherent origins fixed in the distant past and excluded by queerness, but on what happens when one returns home. Such a return is exemplified by memory, is a remembering home and ‘offers the possibility of reassessing and reconciling with the childhood home’ (Fortier 2003: 124). Remembering is not merely about retrieving memories of the past but about imagining new spaces to populate with ghosts of the past and presences from an imagined future (Fortier 2003: 124).

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<sup>15</sup> Anna Nobile is a writer and a journalist living in Vancouver. Her work has appeared in journals such as *the eyetalian*, *effe*, and *The Antagonist Review*, as well as the anthology of erotic fiction *Hot and Bothered*, and the anthology *Mamma Mia: Good Italian Girls talk back* (McLean Maria 2004) (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 358).

Queer diasporas are therefore transformations of home through the desire to reconcile split images of past, present and future. This is well expressed by Anna Camilleri in her short story 'Red dress', included in *Curraggia*, which was followed by the novel 'I am a red dress' (Camilleri 2004). The theme of the two texts is the re-visiting of familial secrets: father-daughter incest in an Italian-Canadian family of Sicilian descent. While in the first novel the female victim of violence dreams of wearing a red dress at the funeral of her father, in the second novel the theme is further developed. The red dress becomes a recurrent image, and turns into a metaphor: the desire to re-dress personal history and to heal the wounds of the past through the imagination. The red dress becomes a symbol of defiance of the Sicilian rules which stipulate women should dress in black to mourn the dead; it becomes a synonym of the queer energy, the feminine energy that makes women alive (Camilleri 2004). As expressed by Camilleri:

This story is a lexicon between my grandmother, my mother, and I – the stuff that mythology is made of – mother, maiden, and crone. Grandmother notices a red dress. Mother imagines wearing a red dress. Daughter becomes the red dress. The redress (Camilleri 2004: 12).

In this sense the return home, the return to family, is the re-invention of family. Home is not just a fixed place to return to but a variety of spaces of attachment which are constantly discursively constructed (Fortier 2003: 131). These constructions are performed by juxtaposing objects referring to a traditional notion of home, like the kitchen, with scattered images of the present, as in the following poem in *Curraggia* by Nzula Angelina Ciatu (1998b: 125-127):<sup>16</sup>

### **Untitled**

Shame & guilt  
feelings i 'm familiar with  
anger takes getting used to

[...]

shame

everytime i struggle

to speak italian

when sicilian rolls from me

naturally

smoothly

still i dare not speak

this forbidden tongue

shame

because even my sicilian is limited

a stabbing reminder

of all severed

by assimilation

shame & guilt

at every family gathering

my working-class secondlanguageenglish

[...]

shame for having become estranged,

from my roots

guilt

for what i can't turn back to

first generation

living the borderlands

piece together

identities

chewed by oppression

finally

at the kitchen table

surrounded by italian dykes

hands swing  
 with **gusto**<sup>17</sup>  
 high pitched voices & accents speak  
 i savour every word  
 [...]

at the kitchen table  
 reunited  
 with parts of myself  
 i'd always run from  
 guilt  
 for having hated my ethnicity  
 rage  
 for having been made to hate it  
 frustration  
 feeling I'm drawing attention  
 to myself  
 marginalised ethnic dyke  
 [...]

The protagonist of the poem revisits home out of a desire to integrate into her current life the traditions and the home language previously rejected and hated, due to a school system that in the 1960s in Canada was centred on the assimilation of minorities (Pivato 1994).

Queer is here inherently tied to a reconstruction of home which challenges and blurs a canonical separation of spaces, putting Italian dykes in the place where, by tradition, the Italian heterosexual woman has been relegated. Such a space becomes a hyperspace where the protagonist floats between two cultural models, situating herself at the crossroads between old culture and new culture.

The Sicilian language, along with her frustration at not being able to speak it fluently, is part of Ciatu's identity construction process. Moreover, the misspelling of English language pronouns such as I, and the adjectives Italian and Sicilian, written in lower-case letters like it would be in the Italian language, shows how this identity reconstruction works by mixing

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Italian dialect.

together, in new ways, different cultural elements. The importance of language, and with it translation, is even more evident in two poems by Giovanna (Janet) Capone (1998a:135-136) in *Curraggia*:

### **Last night I was visited by the ancestors**

They sat heavy in my dreams  
the dead ones  
now undead  
were talking, laughing  
resting their hands on big bellies.

There was coffee  
in demitasse cups  
and crumb cake  
on the table,  
a cardboard box of **cannoli**  
and almond **biscotti**  
and lots of loud laughter  
“Ha ha ha,  
She thinks she’s different from us  
because she’s queer?”

**“Non farmi ridere!”** one aunt said

“Same problems, same pain.

Same old shit!”

[...]

**Va fanculo**<sup>18</sup>, you ancestors!

You sit too heavy

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Gusto’ means literally ‘taste’. Here it has the meaning of ‘pleasure’.

<sup>18</sup> The expression is a swear word very popular also among North Americans of non-Italian origin (Serianni and Trifone 1994).

in my dreams

[...]

**Le sorelle di mia mama<sup>19</sup>,**

**mia mama, i miei parenti, tutti**

**Molti avi**

**ieri sera**

some dead

some still living

All of you flourishing wildly

in my soul

“Lesbian? **Va Nabola!** You think

you’re different from us?

You think your life will be free

of pain?

**Non farmi ridere!”**

In this first poem queer is understood as a form of translation: the scattered noun phrases and sentences in Italian and Southern Italian dialect referring to food or swearing are an attempt to depict the language of conversation, and to translate and reassess the linguistic and cultural roots of the protagonist. The family members are ghosts who haunt Janet’s dreams and remind her, in their mother tongue, of the common destiny of pain and suffering she shares with them. Being queer does not make Janet different from them and behind this statement there is irony: ‘Va Nabola!’<sup>20</sup> Non Farmi ridere!’ (Translated: Go to hell! Do not make me laugh!). Queer describes a process of estrangement and a struggle for integration that Janet has in common as lesbian with her parents and relatives who emigrated to North America from Italy and fought to adapt to the new country. Queer refers thus to a diasporic home which is already queer since its in-betweenness (Fortier 2003: 123) is a site of struggle between different cultural values, the North American and the Italian. The poem is an attempt

<sup>19</sup> The spelling of *mama* is incorrect: it should be written with double *m*. This is a very common pattern in the anthology and attests to the fact that firstly these second or third generation Italians in North America have not mastered the language and secondly that Italian abroad is contaminated by the English language.

<sup>20</sup> The expression ‘Va Nabola’ translated literally means ‘Go to Naples’ (Sobrero 1996). Janet relatives and ancestors come from the region Campania in Southern Italy whose main city is Naples and therefore that was an

to reconcile this separation by creating a dream space where the protagonist self can remember a new home.

These same considerations can be applied to a second poem by Janet Capone (1998b: 128-130).

### **Dago Dyke**

At 23

I left my family behind

on New York

I often picture me

at that time

short dark hair

leather jacket

and a big black motorbike.

Screaming dyke.

I always liked

the colour black,

in fact,

I have aunts 4 feet 11 inches high

who wear it all the time.

I picture me

at 23

breaking the traditions I was raised by.

**Che vergogna! Malafemmina!**

Defying **la famiglia**

You gotta have alotta guts<sup>21</sup>

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expression used to dismiss somebody's ideas, sending him/her away to the far city (probably used by people living in the countryside far away from Naples).

<sup>21</sup> The phrase 'You gotta have alotta guts' represents an instance of 'ethnolect'. This term refers to the ethnic belonging of a speaker born in a place where the language he/she speaks is not his/her mother tongue (Salmon Kovarsky 1998: 68). This is the English language spoken by Italians immigrants in North-America and is



to live another way.  
[...]  
In another time  
this **paesana**  
used to make eggplant  
with her mother,  
drop breaded slices in a pan  
and let them fry.  
I got her soft brown eyes  
and my father's darker skin.  
Now, like him,  
I drop my keys  
on the kitchen table  
when I'm home.  
But I live alone  
no **paesana** there  
to greet me.

Even now, at 33,  
I grate **Romano** cheese  
Fry eggplant in a pan  
[...]  
and remind myself  
that despite the cost  
I'm the boss  
in my kitchen  
and my life.

Janet' sexual orientation has forced her to leave home, a condition expressed by the juxtaposition of the Italian cultural perspective of the importance of living with family in the invocation 'Che vergogna! Malafemmina! Defying la famiglia' (translated: What a shame!

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characterized by prosody, intonation and phraseology which differ from other varieties of English spoken in the country and can be defined as English with a Southern Italian accent.

How bad a woman you are! Defying family), and the North American perspective which stresses independence. Now, at 33, Janet discovers how much her sexuality is tied to her ethnicity, from the colour she wears (black like her Southern Italian aunts) to the food she eats (Romano cheese and eggplant). This realisation, this mental journey back to family allows her to re-interpret and remake, in an empowering way, the space she inhabits miles away from her real family. In this new space she turns into a *paesana*<sup>22</sup>, a hybrid product of immigration, a woman from a diasporic village she has recreated for herself. These same concerns, about how homosexuality cannot be separated from ethnicity, are also expressed by another Italian-North American lesbian writer of Sicilian descent, Rose Romano. In her controversial essay *Coming Out Olive in the Lesbian Community: Big sister is Watching you* Romano (1996) by calling herself Olive, critiques the lesbian community for not being able to look at differences within the white community.<sup>23</sup>

The examples analysed have shown that translation and language play a crucial role in diasporic narratives. To overcome the schizophrenia inherent in a bilingual culture the writers of *Curraggia* must reevaluate the heritage culture by impregnating the English language with the meaning and the emotions left behind in the Italian or Southern Italian dialect (Pivato 1994). The risk is that the use of Italian and Southern Italian dialects in the texts becomes empty signs, and the otherness sought to enrich and understand the self is often never grasped. However, the Italian in the text contaminates the English (see the lower-case for I, Italian and Sicilian in Ciatu's poem, and the Italian pronunciation of 'you gotta have a lotta gusts' in the second poem by Capone) and the Italian is contaminated by the English (the spelling of the Italian words is often wrong and reproduces an Italian pronounced with an English accent). The hybridity created by multilingualism I believe disrupts binary oppositions between cultures and so contributes to queering stereotypical images of family and ethnicity.

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<sup>22</sup> According the Italian dictionary compiled by De Mauro (2006), *paesano* is 'chi e nativo o abitante di un paese' (the person who was born and lives in a village). For an Italian, *paesano* is thus a person who is from the same town or a nearby town in Italy. For an Italian-North-American instead, *paesano* refers to Italians from the same region in Italy while for English-North Americans who are not of Italian origin it can signify Italians in general and it is used in a friendly way.

<sup>23</sup> Rose Romano is the author of two collections of poetry: *Vendetta* (1990) and *The Wop Factor* (1994) (Lorriggio 1997). She wrote also the essay, *Coming out Olive in the Lesbian Community: Big Sister is Watching You* (Romano 1996).

Translation is a metaphor of queer: a constant movement back and forth between cultural values in the impossibility of separating one vision from the other, and with the desire of not being trapped by fixity. Translation also exemplifies the mechanisms through which diasporic narratives are constructed: by a constant movement in and out, by an energy which destabilizes current assumptions, which queers stereotypes. This movement in and out generates hyperspace, ‘spaces that are physically inhabited and those that are absent traces or memory of the past’ (Beneventi 2004: 221-222). Memory and time cannot be separated from the concept of space since the writers of *Curraggia*, by re-imagining home, include in the same poetic and discursive space both the present, the memories of the absent past and the desires of the future.

Queer and translation participate therefore in the narrative construction of the Italian-North American/Canadian women writers. I would like to call such a narrative ‘transqueer’. Narratives demand that the meaning of an event be discerned only by connecting it, spatially and temporally, to other events. A core idea of narrative is emplotment; according to social narrative scholars Somers and Gibson (1994), plot is a construct made out of elements selectively chosen and causally linked together in a given setting and time.

By adding the concept of narrative to transqueer, we stress the importance of looking at queer identity as a plot in which every element is strictly connected to and dependant on the other, as in a web. This brings us back to the necessity, stated in the introduction of this paper, of considering queer identity as inclusive of many intersecting identities, such as race and ethnicity, which have been ignored in the mainstream perception of queer. The examples analysed proved that for these women, returning home is a way of queering ethnic identity (which has always been considered fixed) through their ‘queer’ sexuality. In so doing they also re-perform their ethnicity; they re-ethnicise themselves and state their cultural diversity, enriching their understanding of queer (Fortier 1999).

A clear example of this is given by Laura Scaccia Beagle (1998: 137)<sup>24</sup> in the poem ‘Syllables, Symbols and Rhythm’ in *Curraggia*:

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<sup>24</sup> Laura Scaccia Beagle is a guitarist, singer, songwriter and a teacher of English as a second language to adult women. She lived in the Chicago area most of her life (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 353).

*It was much more difficult to explore [...], embrace the identity of being queer. I honestly struggled with the labels “lesbian” and “dyke”. For me the queer identity is uncovered rather than proscribed or apparent in the same way ethnicity is. I have struggled with a queer identity as shameful [...]*

*[but then] I became aware of how interwoven my Italian identity is with my woman-loving identity. I think it's impossible to view them separately (1998: 137).*

## 7. Conclusion

This article has aimed to expand recent discussions of queer diasporas by including in the analysis terms such as translation, language and narrative. *Curraggia* has provided a starting point for tackling these concepts since many of the stories featured in this anthology deal in general with the notion of female sexuality and homosexuality, and with their close connections to the ideas of language and ethnicity. Notwithstanding the fact that *Curraggia* takes the form of a fictional account of the lives of a great number of women, it was born as a political project to give a voice to ‘ethnic’ Italian women. The queer agenda of *Curraggia* is present, therefore, in the investigation of a paradoxical and unthinkable link: being Italian and being lesbian in the traditional diasporic Italian communities in North America. The anthology fictionalised nature does not prevent a sociological analysis of the concept of queer since the borders between fiction and non-fiction have become more and more blurred. Fictional narratives cannot be separated from ‘narrative’ as understood in the social sciences: literature has an indexical value both for history and society and must be analysed with relation to the needs of society at large (Iser 1993: 263). Furthermore, the notion of queer is better understood by taking into account the power of fiction, the power of the creativity that, as in a play, ‘liberates the imaginary from all banal everyday links and enables us to see things differently’ (Iser 1993: 158). Through examples taken from the anthology *Curraggia* and from other related writings, I have investigated the ways in which queer in diasporic contexts re-magines, reinvents, redresses gender, sex and ethnicity and the way in which ethnicity also re-visits the presumed homogenisation of queer in North America, which does not currently take into account cultural specificities.

The women of *Curraggia* who had separated different spheres of their lives in order to survive in different environments (either in the often heterosexist and homophobic Italian families or in the assimilationist North American environment), set out on a journey which takes them back to family, the first ethnic network as stated by Fortier (1999: 4) as a source of their suffering and exclusion but also as an imaginative metaphor of possible enrichment and change, of new and creative ways of being, as expressed by Anna Camilleri in *I am a red dress*:

I believe in the power of narrative, and I believe that imagination is the single most important precursor to change. [...] I saw a future for *myself* in my stories- and it was there that I created a place for myself in the world, where I made sense of my experience (Camilleri 2004: 173).

Starting from the ideas of Brah (1996) and Fortier (1999; 2001; 2003) regarding queer and diasporas as homing desires, as remaking home, I then interpret this metaphorical journey home as characterised by a linguistic and cultural translation, by a displacement which challenges temporal and spatial fixity and which contributes to the construction of unfixed narratives which I call 'transqueer' (from the terms translation and queer).

The notion of narrative as applied to transqueer allows me also to elaborate on an understanding of queer in the Italian-North American diasporic context so that it includes ethnicity. Such a notion offers the possibility of understanding just how interwoven are the many aspects of our personalities and how important is to look at the co-presence of different identities within the same person. Ultimately it allows us to see how these identities are spatially and temporally interconnected in order to create that difference, that specificity which the women of *Curraggia* invoke for themselves.

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María Amelia Viteri

### **'Latino' and 'queer' as sites of translation: Intersections of 'race', ethnicity and sexuality**

#### Abstract

*Based on ethnographic work conducted between 2004 and 2006 with LGBT Latino community members living in the D.C. metro area, as well as summer research conducted in El Salvador during 2006<sup>1</sup>, I will illustrate in this article that translating across "fields of power" generates new theoretical and methodological tools to better account for the privileged position of 'Western' thought. This discussion becomes more intricate when intersected within the current migration context where subjective identity understandings are constantly decentering 'space' (Gilroy 2000:122).*

*As my research further illustrates, U.S. identity categories such as 'queer' and 'Latino/a' are not stable categories but are constantly reinvented and politicized according to diverse constructions of race and sexuality where notions of 'queer' space (US) are blurred with narratives from the homeland. That is to say, LGBT Latinos/as' refusal to occupy a 'queer' and 'Latino' fixed identity acts as a way to contest, negotiate and re-signify a 'western' (colonial, Eurocentric) 'authority' embodied by these scripts and labels in a translation/border crossing continuous flux. I place my discussion of identities within a power/knowledge framework (as theorized by Foucault 1972, 1978, 1980) and apply it to the difficulty of translating sexual and racial borders when crossing borders that have been geographically and politically defined as the "United States of America" and "El Salvador." I will interject Gilroy's (2000:122-123) discussion on memory that suggests it is precisely on the trans-national spaces within and between the 'homeland'/'Diaspora' as well as in the 'in-betweens', where memory becomes a primary ground for a multiplicity of identities without a particular origin to emerge 'in a queer time and place' (Halberstam 2005). This research expands current discussions on the production of Latino LGBT subjects mostly carried out on the U.S. West Coast (Roque 2002) and New York by and large focusing on Chicanos/as and Caribbean LGBT communities (Rodríguez 2003; Quiroga 2000; Muñoz 1999).*

*Border crossing has entailed that Latinos and mostly non-white ethnicities face an institution apparatus that either denies them entrance or deports them based on their 'undocumented' condition. These conditions are aggravated by ethnic/sexual/racial/gender identity status (Luibheid and Cantú 2005). Passport controls, border checks, interviews,*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of my Ph.D Dissertation (2008) in Cultural Anthropology, Concentration on Race, Gender and Social Justice at American University, Washington D.C. Although I am not including direct quotes from Salvadoreans living in El Salvador in this article, I am nevertheless arguing for a geo-political continuum between the barrios of El Salvador and the barrios of D.C. I would like to acknowledge the valuable insights and testimonies shared by the Latinos/as who so willingly participated in this project. Special thanks to Dilcia Molina who believed in this research when I first knocked on the doors of the Latino grassroots organizations in Columbia Heights, Washington D.C.



*interdiction, detention, “secondary inspection”, profiling, and other tactics have served to establish or determine identities, to draw out “confessions” of who one is (Epps, Valens and Johnson 2005: 5). Some of the disciplining practices at play within the different borders are further illustrated in this article through the lives of Mexican and Central American LGBT activists living in the DC area arise from these established identities.*

## **Introduction**

Modern terms such as homosexual, lesbian and gay male presuppose a historically specific sexual and social system, one in which sexual object-choice has been the basis of a core self-definition (Seidman 2003, Foucault 1990, Massad 2002). Individuals may differ as to their social class, gendered, ‘racial’ and ethnic characteristics but they will not be able to take meaning until they have identified with those positions which the discourse constructs. Subjecting themselves to the rules of the constructs, becoming subjects of its (constructs) power/knowledge is also part of this identification. Looking attentively at these intersections, particularly those at play within queerness and Diaspora (Eng 1997) it’s possible to confront the effects of an assumed universalization of concepts around ‘gayness’ (Massad 2002; Vidal Ortiz 2005). This article engages specifically with the intersections of ‘Latino’, ‘queer’ and ‘American’ in the Latino Diaspora in the D.C. area where I conducted ethnographic work between 2004 and 2006 with LGBT Latino community members particularly from Mexico and Central America<sup>2</sup>.

My ethnographic analysis shows how issues around class, race, ethnicity are directly entangled with issues of citizenship and belonging. By understanding how ‘Latino’, ‘queer’ and ‘American’ are located within particular cartographies of place, desire and belonging we are able to articulate a border-crossing ‘queer’ methodology. Such a methodology addresses the intimate relation drawn at those borders where sexual and gender ‘crossing’ becomes paramount for challenging perceptions and readings around race, ethnicity and class.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the predominant population that migrated to this area particularly in the 80s as a result of the U.S.-funded war against Central American countries. The estimated Hispanic population of the United States as of July 1, 2005 is 42.7 million, making people of Hispanic origin the nation’s largest ethnic or ‘race minority,’ that is to say, 14 percent of the nation’s total population according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Methodologically and theoretically speaking, the empirical data and analysis drive our attention to the seldom addressed issue of translation in Anthropology where categories have been commonly described so as to fit within typically ‘western’ systems of classification. As such, the voices of LGBT Latinos bring up the need of categories such as ‘queer,’ ‘Latino/Latinidad’<sup>3</sup> and ‘American’ to move across geographic, linguistic, and imaginary locations transcending standard, U.S. categorization following Rodríguez (2003) earlier work<sup>4</sup>.

In addition, within the theoretical traditions of the fields of Gender, LGBT and Queer Studies I illustrate the limits and constraints of current paradigms within which sexuality and gender have been commonly analyzed as they intersect with ‘race,’ ethnicity and belonging. In the process I highlight the theoretical and methodological usefulness of looking at the ‘in-between’ spaces. Finally, I use hybridity as an alternative lens to the fixed delineation of categories. Rather than claiming an ‘objective’ eye I engage in a dialogue that maps the production of these various positionalities including my own. Asking through this process, what are the effects produced by the conflation of ‘Latino’ and ‘queer’ within a transnational and border-crossing continuum are.

Latinos from the D.C. area who participated in this research study claim various levels of education: from having completed graduate school to having completed middle junior school. Their socioeconomic backgrounds are also multiple and varied, ranging from ‘urban’ to ‘rural’ areas although a great majority of them come from working classes. A particular feature shared by most of the Central American informants is their political leftist activist background initiated in their home countries and marked strongly by the war in Central America during the 80s. For many of them such as TicoV, once they arrived and settled in the United States, this militancy extended towards a struggle for LGBT rights.

TicoV is originally from a rural area in El Salvador known as San Miguel. He’s in his early 30s and had been living in the U.S. for 17 years at the time of the interview. His political

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Latinidad’ alludes to a constructed concept that encompasses geographic references (usually understood as South of the U.S. oddly displacing Mexico from its northern location) and state divisions of territories. These territories are part of stereotypical representations of Latinos (partly created and mostly reinforced by the media) based on phenotype and the idea of an imagined ‘shared’ (Latino) culture where Spanish is understood to be the official spoken language.

<sup>4</sup> These movements are discussed as “anthropological locations” by Gupta and Ferguson (1997).



identity is gay although his practices could be categorized as ‘bisexual’. TicoV illustrates how different predominant- normative positionalities are tainted with a myriad of alternative, sometimes opposite, readings as universalization goes hand in hand with homogenization. The following statement illustrates TicoV’s understandings of ‘gayness’ and ‘whiteness’; that is to say, how ‘queer’ is parallel to ‘gay’ and ‘gay’ is parallel to ‘white’. This understanding, against which the Latino LGBT informants negotiate their juxtaposed subject positions, displaces the equation queer-Latino:

*Mi impresión es quizás que ser blanco y gay es un poco más fácil.*

I have the impression that being ‘white’ and ‘gay’ is much easier.

If, as TicoV suggests ‘queer’ is to ‘gay’ what ‘gay’ is to ‘white’, possibilities of self-identifying with the ‘queer identity’ are not only difficult but problematic. That is to say, not only are categories such as ‘gay’ or ‘white’ not trans-historical (Massad 2002) but they exceed a framework based on sexual and racial formation as has been commonly discussed within LGBT studies. In addition, this kind of evaluation of ‘queer’ as ‘white’ gets exacerbated in instances of border crossing where national borders mobilize certain types of pre-discursive identities (Epps, Valens and Johnson 2005: 5). TicoV’s statement of how it’s easier to be ‘gay’ and ‘white’ than ‘Latino’ and ‘gay’ implies that Latino representations are not parallel with ‘whiteness’ but in constant opposition.

This opposition is visible throughout immigrant’s attempts to go unchecked and unnoticed, to be regarded as not particularly worthy of being seen or, alternatively, as worthy of being seen only as a proper citizen or potential citizen (Epps, Valens and Johnson’s 2005: 5). These immigrants’ enactments act as a response to the continuous monitoring and surveillance, as further analyzed in the next sections through Estrella, Jade and Stacey’s lived stories.

This article argues that it is from the ‘inter’ – from precisely those in-between spaces where interpretations and translations collapse – where the intersections between and within race, ethnicity, sexuality and citizenship could be further illustrated. That is to say, following a



translation methodology this article looks from the inter-spaces of meaning allowing a continuum that brings forward the geo-political spaces where border crossing is the framework of reference rather than the starting point. When a theory of translation and cultural interpretation considers space as a fundamental element contextualizing landscapes as texts, various practices of contestation arise (Benko and Strohmayr 2004). These voices will then create and re-create fluid geo-social-sexual-political belongings where home/Diaspora no longer exist as either/or but as either *and* (Mafia 2003). Diaspora is redefined as not confined exclusively to geographical space following the need to reassess questions of cultural identity in relation to multi-vocal spaces producing alternative temporalities as extensively discussed by Halberstam (2005).

The concept of translation I use throughout this essay connects the concept of ‘border thinking’ to the political economy of language where words, testimonies and field notes *are* in Spanish<sup>5</sup>. Having the original informants’ text followed by its closest depiction in English translated by myself, provides the reader room to think in-between English and Spanish destabilizing any mechanical rendition of the texts. The notion of ‘border thinking’ constructs a concept of identity that goes beyond biological fixation, constructivist disembodiment and harmonious homogeneity. It is a space for ambiguity in constant transition that ‘translates’ the cultural baggage that seeks to define and fix it.

This article is divided in three sections. The first section illustrates, through the situated life of Estrella, how the intersections of ‘queer’ and ‘Latino’ provide windows to further expose the normalization of the ‘race/ethnicity/sexuality/citizenship’ conundrum. Estrella’s narration further depicts how ‘queerness’ and ‘Latinidad’ are in constant negotiation with the politics of ‘American’ citizenship. The second section calls for a move beyond dialectics where Estrella’s voice is joined by Stacey’s and Jade’s to confront commonsensical representations of over-sexualized ‘Latinas’. It is the translation of their ‘Latina’ ethnicity and their shared subject positions as ‘transgenders’ that disrupts any possibility of linear readings around Diasporic ‘trans’. This conversation is carried forward in section three to further account for the discrepancies of migration and border crossing where having official U.S. citizenship is not

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<sup>5</sup> The native language of the people that I interviewed and my native language as well (being Ecuadorian).





translated into becoming part of the ‘American’ and ‘queer’ melting pot. I close this article by further illustrating the assumed neutrality of categories such as ‘Latino’ and “queer’. The continuous negotiation around place, belonging and ethnic/racial/sexual identities are articulated in those iterative moments that mark the possibility and impossibility of identity, presence through absence (Butler 1990).

### **On “Latinidad”: Estrella’s story**

If sexuality is not just about sex, nor is it only about sexual identity, then what is about? As Weeks (1989) explains, sexuality refers to the cultural ways of expressing our bodily desires and pleasures. Nevertheless, sexuality has been constructed as an attribute of individuals, as something attached to either gender and/or identity. Gender studies have been concerned with sexuality as one of the main axioms where inequality is perpetuated through the naturalization of masculinity and femininity.

Despite these theoretical and methodological redefinitions around gender and sexuality that speak of their malleability, it is still assumed by many that ‘queer’ and ‘Latino’ have a single meaning in the ‘West’. The discussion I bring into this chapter makes visible instead how there are a multiplicity of meanings around ‘queer’ and ‘Latino’ within and around the ‘West’. Hall (1997: 181) would probably analyze this as “one of the effects of globalization that are not evenly and equally spread throughout the world”. While this could be one side of the analysis I have chosen instead to use Estrella’s narrative to show the complexity of these multiple meanings particularly when looking at race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender in a dialectics rather than through fixed theoretical conceptualizations. In addition, ‘queer’ and ‘Latino’ bring to the surface terms such as ‘transgender’. The systems through which all these labels interact and intersect speak of an on-going cultural construction where meanings are contested, re-interpreted and re-signified. Estrella is a male to female transgender originally from Mexico, living in the U.S. with a Salvadorean male partner. Estrella could easily pass as a very attractive woman. Despite her tireless efforts to organize the Latino trans-community in the D.C. area, Estrella has



lately decided to join a cosmetic firm as an independent consultant as she felt her efforts were sometimes misinterpreted or else not acknowledged. Estrella was the first transgender that befriended me and was the first to acknowledge that the only 'queer' in the entire LCentro was me. We have talked, informally for hours about different topics and even started a book project together which had to be put on hold as the telling of her story brought to the surface painful and unresolved issues. She has been in the United States for ten years at the time of the interview.

When I asked Estrella, 'Are you queer'/Eres queer? her response was: "I am a woman here and in China". This reply not only aimed to ratify a sexual identity and gender but also set the parameters to state that categorical labels such as 'woman'<sup>6</sup> cannot be read as 'queer'. In addition, she conveys a strong understanding of the representations around "Latinas". In the following comments Estrella narrates how she reifies the quintessential 'Latina identity'. These comments make reference to the particular context of finding herself working as the only Latina among other white and African-American drag queens as the following narrative illustrates:

*Soy mujer aquí y en la China. Está en todo lado, en mis papeles, como me veo, como me siento. Quizás cuando me muera ahí se darán cuenta porque lo verán. Soy chilanga, apinonada. Acá soy Latina primero, tu sabes, como que tenemos mas sabor, movimiento, hablamos mas alto, y eso se ve. Transgénero? hm.. sólo para lo político.*

I am a woman here and in China. It's everywhere, in my papers, in the way I look, and how I feel. Maybe only after I die they will find out since they will see it... I am chilanga, apinonada. Here I am read as Latina first. You know, we have more flavor, more movement, we speak louder. All that can be 'seen'. Transgender? Hmm.. only for political reasons".

The expression "I am a woman here and in China" is a popular saying that implies that Estrella will be read as a female person no matter where she goes. A possible equivalence in English

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<sup>6</sup> Butler (1999:6-8) has exemplified the limits of identity politics through discussing how feminism has intended to claim an universality for the term "woman", when it became apparent that women's differences in terms of class, citizenship, race, ethnicity, age account for an overwhelming diversity that will radically change the experiences of 'women' across the world beyond the homogenous 'woman' initially proposed.



might be “I am woman through and through”. Estrella’s narrative also brings our attention to how ethnic identities such as *chilanga* and *apinonada* (strong nationalistic epithets) were displaced by ‘Latina’ when she crossed the Mexican border into the U.S. *Chilanga* is a very specific term used for people from the Federal District, it connotes an urban space, cosmopolitan, with all its attached representations. *Apinonada* refers to light mulato people from the urban, cosmopolitan area. Once she entered U.S. territory, these ethnical identities were pushed in the state-defined, homogenous category known as ‘Latina’. Since this category is based on place of origin as pertains to geographical location as well as phenotype, it erases the ethnicity and diversity of the people being termed as “Latino/a”.

As illustrated by Klor de Alva (1999: 172), the separation of ‘mestizos’ with the traditional sense of hybrid started to move beyond a mix of colors to mixed ancestry during the period of earliest contacts in Spanish America. It was only in the seventeenth century that the population of ‘hybrids’ grew to be identifiable. With the disappearance of most native nobilities, phenotype (physical appearances as determined genetically) became the single most important indicators of social and economic statuses. As hybrids were mostly the product of unmarried couples, ‘mestizos’ were associated with every kind of social transgression.

For Estrella as a Chilanga, mestizo becomes a synonym of indigenous (only) and rural. Based on my mestizo self-identity I asked Estrella how I would be identified in Mexico. She responded: “You are white. And didn’t you say you are ‘queer’ also whatever that is?” Estrella’s answer provides another example that illustrates the absurdity of race and ethnical classifications discursively built as ‘fixed’. In daily life, people are constantly resisting such categorizations which change when crossing borders, both internal as well as external. Definitions of who is ‘white’ and who is not vary from context to context (Small 1999: 49) and this is particularly evident in the United States within its rigid racial dichotomy white/black. Nevertheless peoples of mixed heritage already defy static categories or race and ethnicity (Butler 1993<sup>7</sup>, García-Canclini 1992, Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983).

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<sup>7</sup> Another author that explores the way in which queer theory can provide means to understand the other is African American writer Jean Toomer’s refusal to be classified as a “Negro” in Sommerville (2000). He also discusses how this disidentification could be read (or not) as a gesture of resistance.



“Latino” provides new ways of imagining nationhood, belonging and non-belonging where ‘whiteness’ proves false as it has been reduced to skin color (Ware 2001: 19). Nevertheless, Estrella’s narrative shows no references to skin color; instead, she mentions how her being ‘Latina’ could be seen for ‘having more flavor, movement, speaking louder’<sup>8</sup>. This apparent ‘excess’ well documented by Muñoz (2000) could have been constructed and read as such only when juxtaposed with the flatness of ‘whiteness’: lack is to ‘whiteness’ as excess is to racialized ‘Latinos/as’.

Estrella’s narrative seems to resemble U.S. media and popular culture representations and discourse about ‘Latinas’; nevertheless, Estrella doesn’t speak to the assumed visibility of her being ‘chilanga/apinonada’ in an ethnic and ‘racial’ sense to being a Latina. On the other hand, Estrella does reify ‘womanness’ when referring to the possibility of ‘being woman here and in China’. Her close resemblance to normative representations of women might act as a disclaimer while her penis is resignified into a vagina, the quintessential symbol of ‘womanness’.

I analyze Estrella’s narrative using Klor de Alva’s (1999: 175) metaphor of *mestizaje* as a cipher-like nature that could be analyzed as an empty place holder to be filled with almost any category of identity<sup>9</sup>. In this sense, I would argue that Estrella’s reference to her Latina reading illustrates the way she negotiates sexual readings of race and sexuality, whilst negotiating western labels and scripts. This poses a question related with the merging of ‘queer’ and ‘racial’ subjectivities as pertained to the experience of misrecognition where one stands under a sign (‘Latino/a’ and ‘queer’ for the purpose of this study) to which one does and does not belong. Estrella’s story brings out the work of queerness as her narrative bends the meaning of Latina into a new meaning that allows a trans-person identity but not a ‘queer’ identity. The translocative interplay between sexuality and its loaded representations of race and ethnicity provides a strategic way for Estrella to be and remain Latina and not become ‘queer’ or ‘loca’.

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<sup>8</sup> Estrella’s references to *Latinidad* are shared by many predominant Latinas such as Chicana literary writer Sandra Cisneros who discussed in an interview for *El Andar* how Latinas are ‘very sexual... it’s in our bodies... it’s in our colors... in the food... (Chávez-Silverman 2000:183). The latter reinforces not only stereotyping but the over-sexualization of ethnic bodies for market consumption.

<sup>9</sup> The latter considering that hybrid Anglo-Americans have bypassed *mestizaje* as a social category all together as it becomes problematic to purists.



We see these tensions at work in the slippages the following texts provide that illustrate the tensions between ‘Latino’ and ‘queer’. I do not attempt to interpret this text in as much as I want to bring attention to those slippages that are neither in discord nor in unison with the previous one where Estrella is able to claim two separate and opposing gender identities, those of man/woman. The narrative involves Estrella and one of her former male bodied Mexican partners:

*...Cuando llegamos al apartamento dejó la pistola y me dio dos cachetadas que en un hombre tan grande duelen. Yo le dije: ‘pero Miguel, no te das cuenta! Qué es lo que quieres?! Yo soy un hombre también como tú’. El me decía que no, que tú eres para mí, mi mujer. Yo le gritaba ‘soy un hombre!’. Decidí encuerarme enterita. Cuando me vio, ahí se tranquilizó. De todas formas siguió amenazándome pero no podía ponerme (mas) un dedo encima.*

...When I arrived at the apartment he put the gun down and hit me on the face with the strength of a big man. I told him: ‘but Juan, don’t you realize? What do you want? I am a man just as you are!’ He then replied ‘no, you are my woman’. I shouted ‘I AM a man!’”. Then I proceeded to take my clothes off. After he saw *me* then he cool down. In any case he continued threatening me but he would never (again) lay a finger on my body

Estrella’s text calls upon the need to understand sexuality as defined by Foucault (1978): an open and complex historical system of discourse and power that produces the category of “sex” as part of a strategy to perpetuate power-relations. The physicality of Estrella’s genitals exposed on this claim for survival as a man reifies the adscription of organs to a particular sex and gender. The historical relationship based on the adscription of a subordinate status to women generally speaking has not only enabled male violence against women (particularly in intimate relations) but has also tended to naturalize it. This particular epistemology is operating through Estrella’s strategy for survival which consisted in making her maleness visible as a way to equalize the confrontation. Estrella’s text also illustrates that interrogating labels such as queer and “Latino/a” within a historically contingent understanding of race and sexuality opens spaces



to look at these categories as objects within a particular epistemological history: a history that seeks to uncover how race and sexuality operate in this particular Diaspora.

The need to think about the domain ‘queer’ and ‘gender’ as discontinuous is important if taking into account that so-called ‘subordinated’ groups struggle to contest both the hegemonic ‘center’ as well as to becoming part of it. Being part of this mobile center entails for some a ‘westernization’, ‘assimilation’ or ‘acculturation’ where American citizenship plays out notions of belonging. Becoming ‘American’ through birth or years of paperwork does not prevent further discrimination based on the actual practices of sexuality and race that are indeed reproduced in and through the queer.

Estrella’s refusal to buy into ‘queer’ is a local expression of the continuous movement and border identities LGBT Latinos need to negotiate. Adopting ‘queer’ will make Estrella not only ‘American’<sup>10</sup> but ‘white’, a citizenship and ethnicity contested but nevertheless desired particularly for its legal and economic rewards. In other words, if you are ‘Latino’ you cannot be ‘queer’. These slippages, as framed within this research study, could also be read and analyzed as ‘uncertain’ as opposed to monolithic and predictable ‘objective’ readings. The non-neutrality of these non-monolithic possibilities is further exposed when conflated with race, ethnicity and sexuality.

### **Trans-conflations of Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality**

The previous section illustrated ‘Latino’ as a subject position explained through ‘sabor’ and ‘movimiento’ as brought up by Estrella. Jade builds on this imagined Latinidad pushing it further to dispute on the effects of the conflation of ethnicity and sexuality: over-sexualization of ‘Latino’ bodies. Issues related with migration and sexual identity and how the imagined gay community identity is strongly racialized, genderized and marked by class have been discussed by Pichardo (2003: 23). I will add that the imagined Latino community is not only already

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<sup>10</sup> For another reading on immigration and sexuality see Espin (pg. 6) on Women Crossing Boundaries. The author discusses how becoming ‘Americanized’ is seen as almost synonymous with being sexually promiscuous in many immigrant communities (Luibheid 2004: 230)



racialized, genderized and marked by class but also and sexualized as Jade's text will subsequently illustrate.

*Ser Latino desafortunadamente es ser como un símbolo sexual, significa ser una imagen de mujer bonita, desgraciadamente conectada con lo sexual. Eso siento que esta sociedad me hace sentir que Latina es sexual. Para mi ser Latina significa ser trabajadora, luchar, trabajar 3 veces mas para que alguien me escuche y me vea por el ser humano que soy, para que alguien me crea. Por los dos novios que he tenido (americanos) tengo que probarle a un americano que yo soy digna de el. ... digna para bajarte el calzón pero para llevarte a una fiesta de negocios no. (Jade)*

Being Latino unfortunately implies or gives the impression of a sex symbol, it gives an image of a pretty woman, regrettably connected to a sexual stereotype. In this society I am made to feel that Latina equates to sex. From my perspective being Latina means to be hard-working, to struggle, work three thrice as hard so that someone will listen and see me as the human being I am, so that someone will believe in me. From past experiences with two (American) boyfriends I have had to prove them that I am good enough for them. I found that (they believe I am) good enough to take off my panties but not (good enough) to take me out to their business meetings.

Through Jade's narrative we learn once again how Latinos have been traditionally represented through a usually negative discourse charged with highly sexualized stereotypes that turns bodies into a natural co-relation of shapes and acts. This relates to Foucault's concept of bio-power where racism became institutionalized within the State beginning in the 20th Century. Bio-politics was the framework within which decisions on what lives and what doesn't were made creating a division between definitions of what is 'normal' from what is not. This justified the death of the 'other' (Sáez 2004: 74-75) which extends to slaves to peasants to poor to disabled to women to children to homosexuals to immigrants. An example that relates to this particular research are the death risks which undocumented LGBT (and non-LGBT) Latinos are subjected to when crossing the border by foot, poorly constructed boats, cargo trains and trucks, through has been deem as 'illegal'. These crossings risk these people's lives by exposing them to all



sorts of dangers such as starvation, diseases, rape, jail and trafficking (Lubheid and Cantú: 2005). Trafficking goes hand in hand with the representation of Latinos and Latinas as overly-sexualized (as well as Caribbean white/black mixed peoples, afro-descendants among others). The bio-politics of ‘killing’ is then situated within both a figurative as well as a symbolic sense where death risks are multiplied under the mentioned circumstances. Within the geo-politics of the signifiers ‘immigrant’, ‘illegal’, ‘alien’, non-heteronormativity becomes extensive to the body politics of these borders. Like the homosexual, the undocumented immigrant opens an epistemological gap by exercising the power to dissemble, to pass, to make problematic that which is rendered self-evident by a hegemonic ideology of representational significance (Chapin, Jessica 1997:18-19) as illustrated initially by both Estrella and Jade.

To better analyze Jade’s articulation of “Latino” and “sex symbol” it’s necessary to insert Jade’s narrative within a post-colonial framework that provides a genealogy of native bodies as represented by the conquerors mainly for the achievement of socio-political and economic supremacy objectives. As women’s studies scholar M. Jacqui Alexander (Epps, Valens and Johnson 2005: 7) points out, “colonial rule simultaneously involved racializing and sexualizing the population” in such a way that the sexuality of people of color came to the fore as deviant and dangerous against the naturalized and hence often only implicit backdrop of white heterosexuality. Stoler’s (1997:59) discussion on Foucault is particularly relevant in this discussion as ‘racism’ emerges as one of several possible domains in which technologies of sexuality are reworked out and displayed. State racism is not an effect but a tactic of the internal fission of society into binary oppositions. It is a means of creating “biologized” internal enemies, against whom society must defend itself. The latter, race as a bio-technology is exemplified dramatically by Jade’s narrative where Latina equals sex *in this society*. Bio-technology is a devise through which bio-power -a concept from Foucault’s biopolitics theory- operates by enabling us to look at the particularities around the production of the Latino bodies and sexualities in this particular research project. Bhabha’s (1994) tools for a theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity is an analysis to what Jade refers to as an equation of ‘Latina’ + sexual availability.





Sexual, ethnic, race, geographical, territorial, spatial borders: it's the 'inter' - the in-between spaces where cultural interpretation and translation converge. In addition, by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves (Bhabha 1994: 38-39). Nevertheless, will this Third Space provide Latino LGBT immigrants the possibility of becoming sexual citizens? If 'American' is tainted symbolically and materially as being Caucasian, white, male, document, heterosexual (or its ability to pass as such), the access to a 'Western' sexual citizenship might entail assimilation into U.S. culture. The questions I asked throughout this research are not meant to solve this apparent discrepancy but instead to amplify it. Eng's (1997: 37) analysis of Asian American Diasporic communities is relevant here. I fully concur with the author that immigration processes whether from Asia, Latin American or other continents, cannot be understood outside of U.S. neo-imperialism in these regions – the colonization, disciplining, an ordering of Asian, Latino and other identities that begin “over there” rather than “over here” within the domestic borders of the United States.

Jade made reference to the need as a 'Latina' “to work three times as hard so that someone will listen and see me as the human being I am”. Jade's narrative coincides with Stacey's as both address the need as 'transgender Latinas' who live in the U.S. to work harder and become educated so as to be able to further their lives as transgenders and Latinas:

*Especialmente ser una mujer latina transgénero en los EEUU... hay como una doble discriminación en el término científico. Va a depender de nosotras mismas cambiar, cuando tu eres educada tienes un nombre en esta sociedad simple y sinceramente si queremos hacer un cambio debemos educarnos, nadie nos va a poner un stop por mas que tengamos una identidad diferente al resto de la sociedad.*

In particular, being a transgender Latina woman in the US... there's like a double discrimination with the scientific term (transgender). (I believe) it will depend on us to change it, when one is more educated you have a name in this society and simply stated if we want to make changes we need to become educated, no one is going to stop us even though we have a different identity than the rest of the society.



Stacey and Jade's narratives allude to 'Latinas' as 'hard-workers' a term that presupposes them as advocates for change within their societies through being outspoken, hardworking and educated. If we follow Lubheid's (2004: 227) analysis where sexuality structures every aspect of immigrant experiences, 'Latinas as outspoken and hard-working' is tainted with a pre-discursivity that becomes a site of awareness *after* crossing the border. Stacey's narrative closely resembles ideas around self-individual work as a tool to succeed that might as well speak of U.S. neo-liberal discourses that range from the mythical 'American dream' to the popular saying 'pulling yourself up by your boots straps'.

Notwithstanding, Stacey's reference to 'transgender as scientific' and the double discrimination she faces could also be explained through bio-power and its ability to regulate bodies through categories. As categories become part of the 'official discourse' that is to say medicalized through science, people like Stacey and Jade are cut in an endless struggle of overcoming the contradictions of their subject positions. The pre-discursivity of categories such as that of 'transgender' are exemplified through these 'queer' 'Latinas' living in the U.S. whose choices on categories of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity become minimal prompting them to live their lives in constant negotiation and confrontation. Bio-power permeates this pre-discursivity where categories such as 'trans', 'queer' and 'Latino' are already medicalized producing the contested bodies of Tico, Jade, Stacey and TikoV. These bodies and their agency become particularly apparent in this geographical space politically demarcated as the United States.

Stacey and Jade as well as Estrella provide a meditation on their lives as migrants where El Salvador and Mexico is brought forward to the D.C. Diaspora, where their trans-bodies are resilient to give up the fight as they constantly move between sexual and racial spaces. There's no assertion toward a "Westernization" or "Americanization" of non-white, non-U.S. bodies of people, instead there's a reconfiguration of the spaces marked by the 'scientific term' as Stacey explains. The latter considering that language choice can be as arbitrary as gender choice. The trans-conflations of race, ethnicity and sexuality discussed through Stacey and Jade's texts open broader angles of discussion on cultural positionality. The difference in the process of language



is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent (Bhabha 1994: 36).

The discussion that I foregrounded is not about sexual variation in non-white ‘queer’ Diasporic cultures. It’s about dismantling categories in translation, illustrating the fragmentation of ‘gayness’ and ‘whiteness’ as categories for social control. If ‘Latinidad’ does not presuppose neither ‘gayness’ nor ‘whiteness’, sexual citizenship in the current immigration U.S. context becomes a reification of the hegemony of citizenship. ‘American’ as embodied by millions of Latinos throughout the nation nevertheless resists its juridical, economic and social adscription possible only for those ‘authentic Americans’. Authenticity becomes again a point of contention where ‘American citizenship’ is defined through a norm, a matrix reinforced through the Department of Homeland Security through the construction of material and symbolic borders, policies such as political asylum and means that reinforces the illusion of the United States of America as the melting pot as well as the land of rights ‘for all’. This critical discussion is brought forward in the next section.

### **“I am American, I am no different than you”**

Given what has been stated in previous sections, discourses favoring both assimilation and acculturation imply that in order to be ‘gay’ a person has to assimilate into ‘whiteness’ as discussed in the previous section. This has the additional implication of distancing gay from blackness and from a so-called ‘effeminate’ gay into a gay that could pass as ‘heterosexual’. Nevertheless, not everyone can ‘pass as white’ and obtain those benefits ascribed to such subject positioning. In addition, cultural citizenship as framed by the US institutions goes beyond enabling assimilation to enforcing it whenever possible through the various mechanisms of power that end up as immigration policies (Ong 1999).

“I am American, I am no different than you” is how Jade closed the argument with her boss. After working for a leasing company and realizing that Latinos worked harder and received less increase in wages than their African-American colleagues she inquired from her



boss, a ‘white’ woman about this discrepancy. The woman replied ‘you don’t have rights because you were not even born in this here’. In Jade’s own words:

*Yo tenía papeles pero I was not ‘American’*

I had papers (U.S. passport) but I was still not ‘American’.

Jade’s reflection on the differences among race classificatory systems between the U.S. and El Salvador become a turning point for her own understandings of race and sexual identity as the following text illustrates:

*La raza no me la puedo definir. No soy ni negra ni blanca y no soy Native american. En El Salv yo era salvadorena pobre. El gobierno/sistema te obliga porque la primera experiencia cuando fui a sacar mi ID en cuestiones de raza, de sexo, de identidad sexual. Comenzó por eso. En el pasaporte (Salvadoreno) no te preguntan ‘que raza eres’? acá te pedían inmigrante, latina, idioma, para el social (social security number).*

I cannot define my race. I am neither black nor white nor native American. In El Salvador I was a poor Salvadorean. The government/system forces you (to classify yourself) in terms of your race, sex, and sexual identity as reflected through my first experience obtaining my ID. It started there. In the (Salvadorean) passport you are not asked “Which race are you?”, here they would ask (if you were) immigrant, Latina, the language, in order to obtain your social (social security number)

Jade’s text exemplifies governmentally supported attempts to monitor, question, identify, and “know” those who enter, or would enter, and stay, or would stay, in the country (Epps, Valens, Johnson G. 2005). Passport controls, border checks, interviews, interdiction, detainment, “secondary inspection”, profiling, and other tactics have served to establish or determine identities, to draw out “confessions” of who one is. Such controls, checks, and interviews are crucial, it seems, not only for the maintenance of national borders and to the often dubious turns



of national security but also to the plays of identity that are mobilized by, through, and as immigration (Epps, Valens, Johnson G. 2005: 5). Despite this policing, Jade's narrative resists that very act of categorization which may challenge the very epistemologies that subtend such judgments, opening up all kinds of living that resist both these epistemologies of mastery and the politics of domination that they spawn (Winnubst 2007: 88).

This section's title "I am American, I am no different than you" as brought up by Jade is contrasted by Tico who places the core of identity in the U.S. in being documented, that is to say, having U.S. citizenship that legalizes his humanity. Tico is in his late 20s, originally from Guatemala and at the time of the interview had been in the United States for less than a year. Tico has a B.A. in Architecture which places him in a different social class in his hometown, a class that would not be matched in the U.S. as constrained by issues around legality and gender identity and practices:

*Primero ser documentado antes de ser gay, guatemalteco. Sin documentación no puedo ser nadie... (Los Latinos) estamos en otras luchas: pobreza, supervivencia, (luchas) más básicas, dónde vamos a comer, a trabajar.*

One needs to have papers first before becoming gay or Guatemalan. Without papers I am nobody ...(Latin people) we are involved in other struggles, poverty, survival, (we have struggles) that are more essential, where are we going to eat, where are we going to work.

Tico's statement that "without papers I am nobody" not only displaces his sexual and national identity but speaks to the current 'citizenship' debate as exemplified by Balibar (1999: 327) where the immigrants, labeled as aliens by the Department of Homeland Security are denied citizenship by constitutionally showing and persuading themselves that they constitutionally 'lack' the qualities of fully fledged or normal human beings. The fluctuating characters and imprecise borders of class, gender and national belonging to his homeland mark a turning point where Tico becomes literally 'nobody' upon entering the United States. Tico's class position gained primarily through his education, together with his Guatemalan citizenship, is erased when crossing the border together with his Guatemalan citizenship. Tico's sexual identity is erased and



displaced: not only does his 'gay identity' come after his lack of U.S. citizenship but it will need to be re-enacted within a 'white gay' culture. As Balibar's (1999: 326) analysis on class racism suggests, the fusion of a socioeconomic category with an anthropological and moral category takes pseudoscientific credentials from the Darwinian theory of evolution that become invested in a network of social surveillance and control manifested in current immigration practices particularly after 9/11 when 'immigrant' became a parallel to 'terrorist'.

It can be observed in Jade's narrative the limits of Tico's desired legality where, despite her U.S. passport, she's far from occupying the subject position of 'American' and its infinite rewards. To be 'American' is then subjected not only to legal documentation as mandated by current US Immigration and Naturalization Service but by the geo-politically constructed racial/ethnic/national classifications. Tico's claim to becoming someone through becoming an 'American' in U.S. terms is corroborated by participants in the first of two focus groups I conducted around issues of citizenship, ethnicity and sexuality at LCentro. When talking about citizenship as related with migratory status versus a sexual and gender identity the group agreed that, 'el estatus migratorio es primero', 'migration status comes first'. The group also came up with an alternative term for Latino and Hispanic: *mestizoamericanos* (without a hyphen). The term illustrates the possibility of being American without implicitly dropping *mestizaje* as a hybrid possibility of confronting fixed categorizations. In this respect queers, as illustrated by Knopp (2004: 129), are keenly aware of the hybrid nature of their existences...hence their ambivalent relationships to place and identity and an affection for movement.

TicoV, Estrella, Jade, Stacey and Tico's narratives illustrate the in-between spaces brought up by the conflation of 'Latino' and 'queer' juxtaposed with 'American'. Border crossing enables a thorough analysis of this juxtaposition. I would differ with Stychin (2000: 604) who claimed that gay and lesbian immigrant communities shape a placeless and transnational community made by a world network of gay cities that have commonalities that keep a certain homogeneity. The deterritorialization the author speaks of entails precisely the homogeneity of a 'gay culture' loaded with 'white' understandings of gayness largely separated from the Latino material gay lives and meaning-making practices around sexuality constructed throughout a separate epistemology. Pressures to pass as "American" may be most intense at the



border but these persist over time and across places, effectively embroiling ethnically marked, non-white subjects, regardless of their actual citizenship status, in a peculiar coming out and/or passing game of their own (Epps, Valens, Johnson G. 2005: 5).

## Conclusion

This article has problematized the assumed neutrality of categories using 'Latino' and "queer" to look at the tension between sexuality, race and ethnicity that precludes meanings around 'American' in the lives of Mexican and Central American LGBT activists living in the D.C. area. To map these tensions, I have illustrated how 'Latino' and 'queer' functions in this queerness/gayness before and during the experience of the border opening up multiple possibilities to look at conventions which prescribe certain ways of talking about these topics and excluding others. Within a framework of transnational sexual citizenship, socio-political agendas usually regulated by the government are based on a universal gay identity that obscures differences of class, race and ethnicity, to name a few as Leap (2005) illustrates through his work in Cape Town, South Africa.

The 'gayness' tainted as 'white' and 'American' is enacted in the narratives of the Latino LGBT informants I have analyzed. The continuous negotiation around place, belonging and ethnic/racial/sexual identities are articulated in those iterative moments that mark the possibility and impossibility of identity, presence through absence (Butler 1990). It becomes crucial at this juncture for me to speak from a myriad of overlapping and conflicting positions as an Ecuadorian/Latina/'Native' Anthropologist/'queer' to further problematize the intersections of 'race and sexuality' based on U.S. arbitrary classifications. The production of LGBT Latino community identities against what has been constructed as a 'western queer identity' disables the possibility of the imitation of an 'original' (Bhabha 1994).

The narratives from TicoV, Jade, Stacey and Tico illustrate the various ways in which the imagined gay 'Latino' community identity is strongly racialized, genderized and marked by class particularly when migration and sexual identity converge (Pichardo 2003: 23) and how 'queer'





fits uneasily in these narratives. That is to say, there's no room for 'queer' when race, ethnicity, class and sexuality converge and intersect among the LGBT Latinos in the geo-politically marked D.C. Latino Diaspora. I find relevant to close this section with a quote from Michael Warner that speaks towards 'gayness' in non-Western contexts to which I will add *and* Western contexts. Warner seems to assume in this quote a homogenous 'gay political identity' within the United States which my research proves to be not only insufficient but imprecise.

“As gay activists from non-Western contexts become more and more involved in setting political agendas, and as the rights discourse of internationalism is extended to more and more cultural contexts, Anglo-American queer theorists will have to be more alert to the globalizing – and localizing – tendencies of our theoretical languages.” (1993:xii)

Having said this, where do we draw the line between languages? Between cultures? Between peoples? (Bhabha's 1994:85). I believe we are finally analyzing these lines as not only blurred but constantly subject to change and re-signification without the illusory character of distinct and monolithic entities that occur in what has been traditionally conceptualized as 'fixed' spaces.



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Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen  
 Postdoctoral Fellow in Transnational Sexualities  
 Duke University Women's Studies Program  
 elisabeth.engebretsen@duke.edu

**Queer ethnography in theory and practice: Reflections on studying sexual globalization and women's queer activism in Beijing<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract

*This paper addresses the problem of the cross-cultural study of sexuality in global times. I take issue with the inherent bias in analytical frameworks and theoretical assumptions that typically structure Western studies of non-normative sexuality in 'other' places, and provide a critical reconsideration of the challenges to queer studies of transnational sexuality.*

*Recent anthropology-based studies of transnational sexualities and sexual globalization argue that Anglo-US queer studies emphasize desirable queerness as one modelled on modern, Western ideologies of sexual freedom, identity, openness, and of individual rights. The effect is one of considerable political consequence, where Western queer life-worlds become the default analytical yardstick for cross-cultural comparison, and where Anglo-US-centric categorizations forever anchor desirable queer formations within a Western knowledge circuit.*

*I draw upon my own research of Chinese women's narratives about lala, or lesbian, community and activism in post-millennial Beijing. I consider what lesbian identity, activism and rights might mean in a Chinese political and cultural context, and ponder the possibilities and limits of current analytical frameworks in this respect. I conclude that ethnography as method, theory, and academic-activist ethics, provides an invaluable tool for the study of transnational sexualities. It helps us move beyond the binaries of absolute and categorical differences between a Western queer self and the non-Western lesser other.*

Key words: queer studies; ethnography; methodology; globalization; lesbian; China

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<sup>1</sup> I appropriate 'queer' to "represent a loose domain of disparate non-normative genders and sexualities ... [a] provisional academic shorthand that denotes an unfixed set of subjects and that also flags an affiliation with critical analytic approaches ..." (Wilson, 2006, pt. 2)



## **Introduction: Ethnographic possibilities and queer limitations**

Participant observation has a crucial role to play in queer methodology; its ability to decenter personal experience as the source of embodied knowledge can head off the slippage between critiquing and criticizing that threatens to render queer studies into a self-congratulatory exercise where the cast of characters is settled and the conclusion known in advance.

Tom Boellstorff, 2007a: 15

The recent proliferation of publications on sexuality in contemporary transnational contexts, especially beyond Western cultural locations, have contributed to an increasingly sharp critique of queer studies as ethnocentric and biased towards a US-Anglo-centric site in its theoretical and methodological premise.<sup>2</sup> Ethnography-based anthropological studies in places such as Suriname (Wekker, 2006), Namibia (Lorway, 2008) and Indonesia (Blackwood, 1998, 2007; Boellstorff, 2005) demonstrate the limited applicability of - and hence the US-Anglo specificity of - concepts, practices and theories of identity, politics, and sex, which are with little exception considered general and ‘true’ in conventional queer studies. The mati work of working-class Surinamese women, for example, is a current practice with a long Creole history, even as it travels to the Afro-Surinamese diaspora in the Netherlands. It involves sexual relationships with men and women, oftentimes the rejection of marriage, yet they have children and produce alternative kinship relations, and they may accept monetary compensations from men for sex (Wekker, 2006). Mati work, in rejecting fixed identity, exclusive homosex, and emphasizing alternative life-ways can probably be conceptualized as queer, but certainly not as we thought we knew it.<sup>3</sup>

Studies of Other sexualities and genders both in non-Western and Western locations, then, demonstrate that the now-dominant queer model of individualized sexual subjectivity based on coming out, being out, visible and proud as self-identified gays, lesbians, queers *etcetera* are not

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<sup>2</sup> For a useful discussion of the meaning of “transnational” in sexuality studies, see Grewal & Kaplan, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge the problematic application of the pronoun ‘we’ and its implications relating to positionality, location, sameness and difference (see Moore, 1994).





universally important in defining desirable queerness locally.<sup>4</sup> This move towards a perspectival shift as it were, challenges the weary and outdated analytical framework whereby the West (more specifically: the Anglo-US white, urban West) constitutes the default point of origin and reference, oftentimes conflated with the abstract global (e.g. Donham, 1998; Moore, 2004; Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999). In turn, non-Western places and practices are considered its opposite Other: local, secondary and particular. According to this modernist and unidirectional perspective, local cultures - often doubling as frail, authentic tradition and indigenusness - will sooner or later develop and progress into modern, Western-like 'out and proud' cosmopolitan queer identities and lifestyles.

The paradox here is that despite a growing appreciation in queer studies of the complexities of contemporary global sexualities and genders, and of queer analysis' limitations in this respect, there seems to be little genuine effort to re-visit and revise its analytical and theoretical premise, in order to adapt queer studies to a contemporary academic and activist reality increasingly defined by transnationalization and disciplinary intersections. Note here that Teresa de Lauretis, who first coined the term queer theory,<sup>5</sup> soon distanced herself from the monolithic Queer Theory it so rapidly became, by describing it as a "conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry", and "devoid of the political or critical acumen she once thought it promised" (cf. Jagose, 1996).

The problem in the transnational sexualities context, then, is one about (sub)disciplinary complacency, monolithic discourse, and hegemonic institutionalization, and not inherently about the multiplication of place and scale as such. Put slightly differently, of what use can queer studies be in the contemporary analysis of, say, Surinamese mati work, or non-Western subject categories such as tombois, lesbi and lala?

The major specifics of the current problem with queer studies are well illustrated by the critical response of scholars affiliated with the Asia Pacific Queer Network (APQ) to the international *Queer Matters Conference* held in London in May, 2004 (Jackson, Martin et al., 2005). Titled *Re-placing Queer Studies* and published in the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* journal,

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<sup>4</sup> For extensive reviews of this literature, see Boellstorff, 2007b, and Weston, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> de Lauretis, Teresa (1991) 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities', in *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3(2): iii-xviii.



these APQ researchers critiqued the Anglo-US hegemony in queer studies and especially, the general indifference exhibited towards queer cultures and queer studies in non-Western places.<sup>6</sup> Their critique centred on five specific issues, which, I think, characterize the current queer dilemma in sexuality studies more broadly: First, the continued dominance of US-based, English-speaking/writing researchers in queer studies, and hence, the lack of non-Anglo-US researchers and visibility at such events apart from at the very margins; second, the display of inattention yet “well-meaning declarations of American ‘humility’” (2005: 300) to queer cultures and studies outside the US; third, the tendency of the issue of cultural difference and minorities to re-turn to a question of such difference within the US nation-state; fourth, a ‘ghetto structure’ to the streaming of conference papers and panels according to (non-Western) geographical region that assumes regional commonality regardless of topical concerns and expertise. And finally is the Anglo-centric misconception that the default language of queer studies is English. This statement was made by a keynote speaker in rejecting calls for the journal *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly (GLQ)* to publish translations of non-English work (ibid.).<sup>7</sup>

What these exclusionary practices do is to ensure that theoretical and ethnographic knowledge produced in other parts of the world remain sidelined and disregarded at the expense of ‘proper’ queer theorizing and publishing taking place at, mainly, locations in the United States. The further effect is a continued privileging of a particular definition of sexual meanings and research questions and objects based on recognizable sexual identity, discourse, and politics, and anchored in the modern Western Enlightenment philosophy: the quest and requirement for sexual freedom, sexual expression and visibility, sexual rights and equality, and the explicit assertion of fixed individual identity based on innate (‘true’) sexual orientation situated on a homo-hetero axis (‘coming out’). Yet, as Bruce Knauft warns us, this epistemic imperative “... mask larger structures of knowledge and power through which sexual selfhood is incited; sexual identity becomes the mandated core of modern subjectivity that is defined...vis-à-vis alternative standards...” (2003).

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<sup>6</sup> The scholars included Peter A. Jackson, Fran Martin, Mark McLelland, Akiko Shimizu, Helen Hok-Sze Leung, Chris Berry, Huso Yi, and Sharym Graham.

<sup>7</sup> Readers may find it useful to compare this discussion with one some years previously: Dennis Altman (including responses) (2001) ‘On global Queering,’ *Australian Humanities Review*. At: <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/altman.html> (accessed 7 October, 2008)

This paper asks what happens when queer studies take ‘alternative standards’ seriously in the context of transnational sexual cultures and interconnectedness. It considers how certain ‘structures of knowledge and power’ in queer studies, as sketched out above, serve to maintain the marginal position of alternative approaches to sexuality in mainstream queer scholarship. I would argue that at issue here is not ethnography per se, whereby data gathering and finding evidence of diverse sexual life elsewhere somehow are thought to shift paradigms per se. Empirical accounts on their own do not produce theory; descriptive narrative cannot stand in for theoretical rigour and conceptual precision (see, Weston, 1993). In other words, knowledge about mati work, Indonesian tombois, lesbi and gay people, and Namibian lesbians, challenge but do not produce conceptual shifts in scholarship on their own. Rather, the primary location for engineering such shifts, I suggest, must be at the level of research methodologies and theoretical paradigms, which are simultaneously co-constituted by the production of ethnographic data and writing (literature). This is an approach to knowledge production that acknowledges the dialectical relationship that does, and must always, exist between producing data, doing research and formulating theory that matters. In this way, queer aesthetics, theory and politics merge in the academic project of sexuality studies in the contemporary transnational arena. By utilizing the lens of anthropological methods and ethnographic examples in the remainder of this paper, I ponder possible contours of such a perspectival shift in imagining and studying non-normative sexuality and gender.

To this end, I suggest that the research practice of ethnography, as a participatory engagement that requires reflexivity on the part of researcher and in the utilization of conceptual paradigms, and as an analytical lens to bridge seeming dissonance between differing cultural locations and paradigms of sexual truisms, has much to offer queer studies. In part I, I begin by discussing the value of a situated ethnographic research methodology and analytics; I discuss anthropological literature that productively engages theory and ethnography together, in order to situate the critique of queer studies within an ethnographic-analytical framework. In part II and III, I draw upon my own research of Chinese women’s narratives about lala, or lesbian, community



and activism.<sup>8</sup> I consider what lesbian identity, activism and rights might mean in a Chinese political and cultural context, and ponder the possibilities and limits of current analytical frameworks in this respect. In part IV, by way of a concluding discussion, I suggest concrete ways to approach these grounded realities in sexuality research, especially by rethinking queer methodologies beyond an involuntary reiteration of fixed places, conceptual regimes, and necessary Anglo-US-hegemony.

### **I. Queer ethnography - Grounding sexuality research in space, time, and theory**

Ethnography is actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes.

James Clifford, 1986: 2-3

Ethnography is a method of research and a theoretical framing appropriated to analyze the diversities and similarities of cultural life-worlds, of everyday people's lives on an every-day basis. In research terms it emphasises extended periods of fieldwork in local, everyday settings where the researcher participates as much as possible in sustained everyday interaction ("participant observation") in order to gather documentary evidence ("data"). Contemporary ethnography's primary strength besides the contents of its methodology, I would argue, is its "self-recognition as limited and provisional" (Boellstorff, 2007a: 13). This premise, or ideal perhaps, requires rigorous attention to reflexivity, shifting researcher positioning, and to the politics of

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<sup>8</sup> Lala is a term introduced in Mainland China (primarily via the Internet, and from Taiwan) in the late 1990s; it is often used in lesbian communities in Chinese societies to denote, usually, women's same-sex desire and collective and, less often, subjective such identification. In individual subjective identification, women-loving-women more commonly apply notions of gendered sexuality along a masculine-feminine grid, common in lesbian cultures throughout South-East and East Asia. In Mainland China at the moment, these are known as T (tomboy) and P (*po*, which means "wife" in Mandarin Chinese). The TP roles are, however, very recent to Mainland China, compared with places like Hong Kong and Taiwan.



difference, including the writing process of producing Knowledge about Others from the collected data. However, the tense and unresolved interrelationship between descriptive ethnographic accounts of particular practices and locations and abstract theoretical frameworks remains problematic in at least two major ways.

The first is the continued over-reliance on empiricism as presumed and unproblematic stand-in for theoretical and conceptual rigour. I mentioned already that knowledge production that exceeds the dominant sexuality studies paradigm of sexual identity and lifestyle as defined by an ideological modern West remains sidelined. This is also the case for queer theory outside the Anglo-US West. A related problem here is that anthropological or ethnography-based studies of non-normative sexuality remain plagued by inattention to theory amidst ethnocartographic accounts presuming familiarity, travelling concepts and similitude: “In effect the absence of theory becomes the submersion of theory” (Weston, 1993: 144; Boellstorff, 2007b). Theorization is thereby deferred (Boellstorff, 2007b: 19), and this in turn stifles the possibility for critical engagement and revision of received categories.

The second problem is related, and concerns the queer theoretical project in global terms. I introductorily referred to the dominant tendency in queer studies to apply disciplinary practices that reproduce an unchallenged Anglo-US-centric version of queer life worlds and identity politics. True, as I mentioned earlier, there is some recognition of the limited usefulness of Anglo-US-centric terminologies and concepts, and an acknowledgement of alternative models and logics existing Elsewhere (e.g. Blackwood, 2007; Decena, 2008). Yet, the recognition of such diverse concepts and theories do not seem to challenge the continued primary, original, and ‘true’ Anglo-US-centric framework. This is why and how the homogenization or diffusionist model persists, against their explicit intentions, in the face of the increasing transnational evidence for fundamental differences, diversity and cross-cultural connections beyond dual paradigms. This logic of enumeration (cf. Boellstorff, 2007b) – meaning that increasing local visibility of recognizable queerness globally, and reflected in academic scholarship somehow alleviates the privileged US-Anglo hegemony - is what Clare Hemmings recently suggested to be a queer wish-fulfilment: “it *performs* separation of queer inquiry from Western lesbian and gay identities, but remains underwritten and motivated by those identities” (2007: 20; italics in original). The



fundamental part of this prevailing problem is to do with not interrogating the premises from where one defines, develops, and executes a research project. The surface-emphasis on commonalities and similarities, looking for global gays, conflate sign with meaning, image with context, and thus enables monological authority on the part of US-Anglo-centric queer studies.

In a similar vein, Castell and Bryson suggest that mainstream ethnographic research long has been “denying queers’ presence as speaking subjects” through exclusionary disciplinary practices (1998: 98). They invoke James Clifford to call for a “breakup of monological authority” by which they mean “the realization that ethnography can no longer be seen as the monopoly of ‘certain western cultures and social classes’ that ‘ethnographers no longer address a single general type of reader’” (1998: 99). Their critique parallels the critique voiced by the APQ scholars in their challenging of the Queer Matters Conference’s ethnocentric ‘queer monological authority’. I follow with two concrete approaches in recent queer anthropology that attempt to bridge tensions between the local/global and data/theory split.

Recent anthropologies of non-normative sexuality foreground methodological and epistemological arguments to bridge this gap. Tom Boellstorff calls for a ‘critical empiricism’ in queer anthropology that “demands that theorizations be accountable to their subjects of study...[it] asks after the relations of adequation between any theorization and the discursive realities it claims to interpret” (2007b: 19). What is advocated here is carefully situated, invested scholarship: “for the virtue of listening, in a sharply anti-intellectual modernity where the pundit has displaced the intellectual as figure of reflection and debate” (Boellstorff, 2007a: 5). Gloria Wekker similarly advocates a distinctively grounded approach to sexual globalization; ‘grounded’ here referring to extensive ethnographic research, in order to bypass what she terms “lazy” modernist progress narratives (2006). I will return to a more detailed discussion of their approach in context of the Chinese ethnographic material later in the paper.

It seems clear that a crucial step towards dismantling the so-called queer monological authority is to critically re-examine the ways in which we conduct research, including the kinds of questions we ask, to whom we address these questions, the themes we propose, the theories we consult and adapt, and the ways in which we choose to disseminate our research – including



matters of writing, terminology, language and audience (Boellstorff, 2007a/b; Castell & Bryson, 1998; Clifford, 1986).

In order to illustrate the further discussion I will now consider practices and ideologies of lesbian social activism in Beijing, where I conducted twenty months of anthropological fieldwork between 2004 and 2006. In particular, I provide excerpts of conversations I conducted over this period with Xingmian, a woman who was integral to establishing lesbian social activist networks in Beijing in the post-millennial period. Her narrative about her personal journey towards becoming an activist, which includes a long period living in the United States before returning to China, as well as her accounts of the challenges to establish lesbian networks in China, offer rich data of the diverse meanings of rights, activism, their applicability and usefulness.

## **II. Lesbian social activism in Beijing**

Many women believe that one should not participate in just any kind of social activism, regarding 'rights'. It's [regarded as] your own personal stuff, you know. The best thing is to be a good citizen, and [then] a lesbian at the same time. So you can be a good example to others, especially the public: You're a good citizen, so lesbians are not that horrible, or whatever. At the same time, actually, I think many want to hide, not necessarily deliberately so, but they want to pass as heterosexuals...In my own view, I think there still exists a kind of being 'in the fear', you know...However, I can understand this fear very well. Yet another reason why many oppose activism is, I think, to do with not wanting to stand out and say things like "We're lesbians, we're here" etc...because you can really end up 'outing' the whole community. They worry that this will generate a negative response, and then [we all will suffer] attack! Originally, lesbians were just invisible, ignored; but now you [your actions] could cause attack on other people. Many women therefore worry that engaging in activism could have a negative drawback for the whole community. And this is why they oppose it...



These words belong to Xingmian, a thirty-three year old lala activist in Beijing. After many years living in the United States as a student where she was involved with lesbian groups and in organizing networks for Chinese lesbians and gays, she returned to Beijing in 2004, just before I arrived there, and she became active in organizing networks and events locally. The kind of activism Xingmian discusses emanates from a ‘rights’ discourse and presumes an organized and visible collective that speaks out in and to the public. Yet, as I will discuss, the management of lesbian activism relies very much on retaining a certain respectable harmony in containing lesbian visibility within a framework considered appropriate to all parties. In this respect, she points out that many women do not support “just any kind of activism” because being ‘good citizens’ is considered more important than advocating rights for a minority group, but also because such activities may risk not only your own but others’ wellbeing too, including family.

To contextualize; in the post-Mao reform era since the early 1980s, the modernist project and nation building’s discursive imagery have structured subjective and collective identity categories and continue to inform discourses on normative and non-normative sex. Most women I knew consistently emphasised ideal lala qualities as associated with desirable Chineseness in overall accordance with state-sponsored discursive terminology, including ‘being stable’/*wendingde*, ‘being normal’/*zhengchangde*, ‘being modern’/*xiandaide* and ‘having culture’/*you wenhuade*. Yet, naming sexual subjectivities, claiming identity and space, craving at least some level of visibility and social recognition - in turn inspired by the influx of models of lesbianism and queer life from other Chinese societies in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and from Western societies - grew enormously in importance during my time in Beijing.

Despite the fundamental “pluralisation, differentiation, and stratification of [media] publics” (Yang, 1997: 292) which in turn has fragmented the state’s mass public and enabled homosexuality to enter into the public discursive and spatial domain (e.g. Evans, 1997: 206-215; Ho, 2007; Wan, 2001; Wang, 2004), open queer rights activism or direct ‘coming out’ rarely happen in China. Indeed, most women I knew considered such practices to be undesirable, meaningless and morally bad: selfish, pointless, unfair [towards parents], and un-Chinese were common characteristics applied when discussing such practices. These concepts and associations

suggest a prevailing intimate bond between sex and politics, state-sponsored discourse and moral norms embedded in socio-ethical cosmologies; in the Chinese case, a mix of socialist, nationalist ideals, Confucian-originating moral philosophy, and newly available cosmopolitan and globalizing ideologies of material progress and the good life.

In short, two typologies of collective ‘activities’, or *huodong*, characterize current lesbian communities in Beijing; first, there is the ‘having fun’/*wan’er* or ‘relax’/*fangsong* with other women, which include informal drinking with friends at home or in bars, playing sports, or going to karaoke clubs. Having fun and hanging out are, unsurprisingly perhaps, far less fraught with tension than the other mode, namely the ‘organized’/*zuzhi* kind of collectivity. Many women remain very explicit about wanting nothing to do with, or at least they remained exceedingly suspicious towards, activities considered ‘organized’/*zuzhi* and formally labelled *lala* or similar. For example, twenty-nine year-old Shenjiang with whom I chatted online, told me that:

I have never been [to the weekly lala discussion salon] ... I don’t know anyone there; I heard everyone’s really young, and the mature/*chengshude* ones all have a girlfriend already. I also don’t want a lot of people to know [about me]. I only want to find a girlfriend... I don’t want to attend that kind of activities, there’s going to be lots of strangers, I’m not used to it. It’s not that I am afraid, it’s to do with my personality...[But] I don’t have any lala friends, so I feel very lonely ... I just think this is a private, natural thing, but this way [i.e. socializing] makes it abnormal/*buzhengchang* ... I only want to find a girlfriend, I am not interested in other people ...

Shenjiang’s narrative is relatively extreme, but emphasizing the desire keep to yourself, away from a community based on sexuality, and to ‘be normal’ are sentiments that I experienced in the narratives of many women who regularly visited the bars, the Salon, or other lala identified venues. What seems to be at stake is a negation of the Anglo-US-centric imperative of making sexual orientation and desire of primary significance to one’s partaking in a collective sociality that transcends private, invisible, tacit boundaries and thereby risk exposure, visibility – but also, as Shenjiang notes, carries the positive risk of finding love and leaving loneliness behind.



In the main, women argue that appropriate or desirable lala socializing carries a certain ambivalence of non-confrontation and harmonious quality deemed suitable for Chinese culture, although women also talk avidly about wanting same-sex marriage rights and recognition from kin for being who they are. It was not uncommon for me to hear women characterize China as ‘backwards’/luohou or ‘bad’/buhao because of prevailing negative attitude to and discrimination of homosexuality.<sup>9</sup>

There remains an apparent paradox then, in that the kind of open queer life and activism so fundamental to Western queer ideology is overall considered undesirable in current discourses of Chinese lesbian identity, while at the same time the growing popularity and definite need for a lesbian-identified community, desire for tolerance and recognition predicate on at least some degree of lesbian visibility in mainstream society. The question remains, how do we analytically account for the co-existence of seeming oppositional views and practices at the same time without resorting to the dualist, ethnocentric paradigm I critiqued in the introduction?

Drawing on Gloria Wekker’s eminent ethnography of the “globalization of women’s same-sex sexuality” (2006: 223) in the Afro-Surinamese diaspora, and inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s monumental insight that “(social) space is a (social) product” (1992: 26), I suggest that lala spatiality exists not exclusively within a national space, but “is situated in a historically and culturally inscribed space [informed by the] multiple directions of cultural influence” (Wekker, 2006: 225). This approach interrupts an outright defining power of Anglo-US-originating activism, and forces a fundamental re-consideration of socio-cultural context, the local meaning-making processes that make sense of lala sociality, whether fun or organized, or other. This must be seen in context with a collective politics of definition, participation and representation, in particular the ways in which produced space “in addition to being a means of production is also a means of social control, and hence of domination, of power” (Lefebvre, 1992: 26).

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Homosexuality’/tongxinglian is not illegal in China, although many consider it a crime. Folk-theories and popular discourse habitually link homosexuality with illnesses like cancer or mental illness despite the fact that China’s Psychological Association removed ‘homosexuality’ from its official list of mental illnesses in 2001. The general attitude remains one of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ termed “the three no’s”/sanbu, meaning: no approval, no disapproval, no promotion/buzhichi, bufandui, butichang).



Such power struggles, struggles over the rights to belong and the qualities of collective membership, are recurrent themes in Beijing lala networking: the reluctance to participate in organized activities, the negativity towards limited lesbian and gay re/presentations in mainstream society, and the investment in maintaining lesbian space separate and relatively private, a world apart, from normative space like family, work, and college. Li Zhang has aptly commented on the intimate relation between citizenship/belonging and spatiality in late-socialist China that “...increased spatial mobility and deepening marketization gradually erode the economic and social basis for...urban citizenship, [and] new meanings of urban belonging and struggles over citizenship rights are emerging” (2002: 312).<sup>10</sup>

The reconfiguration of public space and its limits in late-socialist China is continuously being contested, and claims to citizenship are “found in spatial claims and practices...and require a sustained inquiry into locally and culturally specific forms of spatial struggle...[of] the right of different social groups to access urban space” (ibid.: 329). Emergent sexual formations and practices, then, alongside gender as women have increasingly claimed independence and personal freedom in the post-Mao era, are inevitably linked with globalizing processes of governmentality, within and beyond national borders.

Based on this socio-spatial contextualization of current China, let me return in greater detail to the issue of sexual globalization via the issue of gendered sexuality and dominant queer discourses. Wekker critiques, as do I, “the lazy tradition-modernity reading” and implied unidirectionality of non-Western cultural transformations (2006: 239), and the common reliance on a so-called ‘master’ model of globalization – itself based on “generalizations of previous master narratives of modernity” (Knauff, 2002: 5). This approach, as we have seen, predetermines a progressive development towards Western late-capitalist modernity, as mentioned. An important issue here has to do with queer studies and gendered sexuality, especially ‘lesbian invisibility’ (Blackwood & Wieringa, 2007; Boellstorff, 2007b; Wekker, 2006). Wekker laments the persistent lack of

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<sup>10</sup> Zhang defines late-socialist China as: “a unique historical moment at which the Chinese economic system has largely shifted toward a capitalist mode of production mixed with reduced state-managed production, while the political-legal system remains largely dominated by one-party rule” (2002: 312; but see Zhang’s fn 1, p. 312 for further contextualisation of late-socialism in China).

attention to women's same-sex sexuality and globalizing dynamics and the continual focus on gay men and gay male sex in current literature (2006: 223). Boellstorff in a similar vein contends that it is a cause for concern that: "few ethnographic monographs on female nonnormative sexualities have emerged. Because such monographs are a mainstay of anthropological prestige (and rightly so, given that they render most visible the insights offered by sustained ethnographic engagement)..." (2007b: 20-21). This links to a wider problem regarding queer's ignoring of the fundamental gendered component of sexual subjectivities. Evelyn Blackwood thus argues: "Under the terms of Western defined gayness, gendered models of sexuality appear backward and nonprogressive" (2007: 195).<sup>11</sup> This is a particular concern where women's sexual cultures are fundamentally embedded in opposite-gender models like in China, where the TP roles and subjective identifiers (if not quite 'identity') are prevalent modes of sexual conceptualization.

In order to move beyond limited, 'lazy' paradigms, Wekker advocates a "grounded" ethnographic approach to globalization (Burawoy et al., 2000).<sup>12</sup> Women's lives in Suriname and the Netherlands inhabit two major models of female same-sex desire. Lesbianism, the first model, is "constructed as an exclusive desire for women, is ideologically invested in "equality" along several dimensions, e.g. age, income, and educational level, and is associated with "modernity" (Wekker, 2006: 225). The second model, the 'traditional' practice, which I mentioned, is called *mati work*: "with its flexibility in terms of sexual partners, its often large age differences and polarized roles between partners" (*ibid.*). Mainstream studies of sexual globalization advocate a hegemonic "cultural homogenization thesis", Wekker maintains (*ibid.*: 224):

in the meeting of these two models lesbianism will, sooner or later, prevail; the *mati work* will give way to the dominant Euro-American form of female same-sex desire. This expectation is alive in commonsense discourses, but it is also fed by academic discourses that see an unproblematic unidirectionality in the field of sexual globalization, a triumphant progress and transfer of sexual forms and identities from the West to the Rest (*ibid.*: 225-226).

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<sup>11</sup> See also Blackwood and Wieringa's timely feminist critique of gender-neutral "global queer perspective" regarding the production of gendered and sexual subjectivities (2007), and Wekker (2006).

<sup>12</sup> Burawoy, M., J. Blunt et al. (2000). *Global Ethnography: Forces, connections, and imaginations in a postmodern world*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.



Wekker's ethnographic methodology is designed to surpass dominant paradigms through a grounded ethnographic enquiry, "starting from the experiences of Surinamese mati...and explore their global and local contexts and how they are imbricated in each other" (2006: 224).

A related issue here is the local/global dynamics, specifically the persistent "focus on the surfaces and commonalities of sexual globalization without adequately understanding the particular historical and social contexts in which these sexualities are embedded" (Wekker, 2006: 223).

Taiwanese lesbian-feminist Wang Ping thus critiques the current premise of a particular - and dominant - queer internationalization:

Some people argue that tongzhi<sup>13</sup> in Taiwan have to step beyond the confines of the locality to join the world. The point being to increase the visibility of the Taiwanese queer community in order for us to be proper men and women of the modern world – an argument predicated on a certain understanding of modernity. I feel it is quite horrifying to talk about modernity in Taiwan these days, because people simply invite many internationally renowned queer people to hold international conferences to discuss internationally significant topics. (2001: 129)

Boellstorff also challenges the ethnocentric premise of a Western, contemporary queer reference point; he argues against the "nostalgic approaches that dismiss lesbian women and gay men outside the west as contaminated by the foreign, to seek instead ritualized forms of transgender or homosexual practices that supposedly reveal regimes of idyllic precolonial tolerance" (2007b: 22). Note that this rhetoric is not exclusively the misinterpreting praxis committed by Anglo-US queer academic-activists towards passive non-western queers as Boellstorff's otherwise correct criticism may imply. Taiwanese scholars Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei critique the 'nostalgic idyll' of "an 'essentially' non-homophobic Chinese culture" (2005: 31) propagated by writer-activists like Hong Kong-based Chou Wah-shan in his advocacy for Sino-centric 'coming out' practices: non-

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<sup>13</sup> Tongzhi, meaning 'comrade' denotes [gender-neutral] 'gay', 'lesbian', or even 'queer'. Its literal meaning is 'same will/aspiration' and is a subversive re-appropriation from official socialist usage to denote a member of the Communist Party.

conflictual harmonious relationships, non-declarative practical everyday acts, and ‘healthy’ personality not centred on sex(uality) (Chou, 1997; in Liu & Ding, 2005: 15).<sup>14</sup> Liu and Ding note the paradox in such rhetorics regarding its emphasis on self-imposed “invisibility and unspeakability or anything having to do with homosexuality” (2005: 48), on saving face and reticent tolerance based on a claim to ‘traditional’ Chinese finial ethics. This strategy, they argue, depends on complying with “finely tuned socio-ethical practices...relegated to their proper non-places in the micro-politics of everyday life” (2005: 49; see also Decena, 2008, Manalansan, 2003).

Indeed, most Beijing women would persistently frame same-sex preference as a “personal matter”/*gerende shiqing* that they just wanted to get on with their lives, and not make an issue of such a natural, normal thing that their same-sex desire and relationships purportedly was. There was a corresponding disinterest, sometimes expressed disdain, for organized/*zuzhi* activities that potentially traversed private-public spatial domains and thus increased the risk for involuntary exposure and outing: “Many women fundamentally oppose activism”/*tamen genben fandui ‘activism’* said Xingmian, who struggled to recruit lasting volunteers for the Tongyu group.<sup>15</sup>

In everyday lala lives open sexual identity, coming out or seeking a community were not crucial concerns; rather, it was how to navigate within framed margins and not overstep the boundaries of relative invisibility that made it possible to ‘pass’, successfully retain family relations and professional ties, and at the same time participate and experience community and intimacy with women. Rather than assuming that these women were in an intermediate, liminal stage of the linear road to authentic, modern lesbianism, I suggest instead that there were complex, shifting allegiances at play. These modalities of participation resembled what Wekker in the Surinamese context called an “overlapping patchwork of women’s networks all over town” (2006: 39). Lala community building took place in context with the late-socialist project of modern nation-building based on a discourse of appropriate Chineseness. In short, collective sexual subjectivities were shaped in interrelationship with continuing yet changing “articulations of globalization and nation” (Boellstorff, 2007b: 23).

<sup>14</sup> Chou Wah-shan (1997). *Post-colonial tongzhi*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Queer Press.

<sup>15</sup> Tongyu info at <<http://www.lalabar.com/news/bigclass.asp?typeid=19&bigclassid=49>> (in Chinese)





The concern with a relative preference for invisibility and the prevailing responsibility of queers themselves to “to protect everyone else’s face (read: the faces of those who conform)” (Liu & Ding, 2005: 36), is therefore appearing as a key paradoxical dynamics in lala space making an emergent collective politics.

### III. “Now there exists a space so we lesbians have to take it”

These words were spoken by Xingmian, on an occasion when we discussed the current surge in lala networking and the recent proliferation in lesbian and gay life in China. Emerging as probably the most prominent local activist during my time in Beijing, her narrative of lala organizing, establishing a locally accepted and acceptable balance between casual fun and organized, educational aspects, is telling with regard to her transformative personal experiences, from being an ‘anti-activist’ student abroad, to her return to Beijing and initiating the Tongyu network. In different ways, it also shows the complex dynamics of activism, outreach and invisibility, the constant threats linked to transgression and its effects, the prevailing policing of boundaries for possible expression, and the limits to appropriate management of collective and individual face/*mianzi* in society at large and within the lala community.

Lala collective spaces were more or less non-existent until the mid-nineties, when due to a combination of international (e.g. 1995 UN Women’s Conference, and consolidation of HIV/AIDS networks) and local events (especially various effects of reform policies) semi-public venues catering to women and men seeking others of their same sex emerged. By 2005, Beijing was experiencing a dynamic upsurge in semi-public community building that was diversifying into not only a greater variety of bars but also semi-public and lala-identified organizations, conferences, research projects, free zines, and mainstream media exposure. Xingmian said:

The Chinese situation is very particular, it’s due to the rapid economic development, and also because there are huge differences between the regions in terms of these groups and their work. Actually, I think that civil society now has achieved some space/*kongjian* in China, and that this is really a chance for activism. So, for lesbians, then...there is a



social space/*shehuishangde yi ge kongjian*, so we have to take it/*women yinggai qu 'take it'*. Someone from the lesbian community have to take it.

Xingmian here comments on the recent possibility for claiming alternative space for lala organizing, and indicates the crucial interrelationship between gay and lesbian communities. This considerable change is intimately connected with socio-economic transformative processes in Chinese society at large. Official discourse on homosexuality emerged from almost total obscurity in the early 1990s; scholars then began publishing and speaking positively about homosexuality beyond a strictly political (“western decadence”), legal (“crime”) or psychiatric (“illness”) framing.<sup>16</sup> This new interest in “the phenomenon of homosexuality”/*tongxinglian xianxiang* must be seen in context with the mentioned state-sponsored civilizing agenda; enabling a new and relatively positive discourse on homosexuality happened in close conjunction with a general obsession with socio-economic modernization and development – not the least with providing scientifically correct knowledge about all aspects of the society, especially those previously excluded for political reasons, in a bid to raise China’s overall quality to Western standards.

Furthermore, the emerging consumer economy and mass media, especially the Internet, and general society experienced the effects of the Open and Reform Policy, by having greater access to foreign and alternative information and news, an influx of queer foreign students, tourists, and business people, the possibility to travel and study abroad and so on. In short, state-sponsored dominant discursive and agentive limits had become more vaporous; other possibilities emerged both from within and from foreign cultures, and this enabled alternative formations like queer communities to emerge.

By the time of Xingmian’s return in 2004, gay groups had long benefited by state-sponsored public health interventions regarding HIV/AIDS, and were therefore able to organize MSM (men who have sex with men) initiatives and collaborate across the country on sexual health

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<sup>16</sup> For example: Li, Yinhe & Wang Xiaobo (1992) *Tamen de shijie (Their world)*. Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe. Zhang, Beichuan (1994) *Tongxingai (Homosexual love)*. Shandong, Shandong Science and Technology Press. Fang, Gang (1995) *Tongxinglian zai Zhongguo (Homosexuality in China)*. Changchun: Jilin Renmin Chubanshe. Li, Yinhe (1998) *Zhongguo nuxing de ganqing yu xing (Love and sexuality of Chinese women)*. Beijing: Jinri Zhongguo Chubanshe.



matters that included social outreach beyond a physical health focus (cf. Wan, 2001). These networks were crucial for lala organizing said Xingmian:

When I first arrived [back], I hardly knew anyone in the community ... But I knew Wan Yan Hai [AIDS/HIV activist], and I had previously written to Zhang Beichuan [medical scholar]. From working with ITS<sup>17</sup> I had some Mainland contacts from when ITS had helped fund Mainland tongzhi participate in the Hong Kong Tongzhi conferences.

Lesbian women's networking - compared with the immediate danger of HIV/AIDS that seemed to have drawn MSM and gay men together – face a consistent problem in that most women are not particularly interested in actively 'taking' any publicly available spatial opportunities and label them lala or similar. As mentioned, the casual, non-committing emphasis on 'having fun' remain dominant, and participating in 'organizing' is often perceived as negative in various ways - whether it be 'boring', too many old women or too many 'kids'/*haizi*, and so on.

The cause for this reluctance is perhaps most importantly to be found within the collective memory of previous negative outcomes of attempts to organise lesbian (and gay) events. As mentioned, the mid-1990s had seen the first serious and sustained efforts to establish same-sex communities, yet the authorities intervened far more directly than now, by censoring events, intimidating the nascent queer activists into [partial] obedience, and targeting homosexuality as social and mental ills.<sup>18</sup> Tongyu's predecessor, the Beijing Sisters/*Beijing Jiemei* network was very active between 1998 and 2001, but vanished after police shut down a culture festival, a milestone event that is still remembered and discussed. Back in 2001, the Lesbian Cultural Festival drew fierce critique, as Xingmian commented: "There was a very heated discussion on the Internet following [the festival shut-down]: What was really the strategy, and what did they want to achieve? [The main organiser] was very radical, very human rights focussed, and while I agree with her basic principle, the timing of this event was very problematic."<sup>19</sup> The issue of timing here is important. While the internal organizing had its problems, there was certainly the bigger

<sup>17</sup> Institute for Tongzhi Studies, City University of New York <<http://www.tongzhistudies.org/>>

<sup>18</sup> For an account of early lesbian (and gay) community networking in Beijing, see He, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> See Wang, 2004, esp. ch. 4 for a detailed discussion of the Cultural festival events.



problem about the way authorities dealt with queer organizing at this time. As sociologist Ching-ning Wang notes:

Police targeted [the festival] as a form of political assembly as it implicitly promoted legal rights for women tongzhi...The conference had been announced...and discussed on women tongzhi websites in China and Chinese women tongzhi websites overseas. Organizers posted their vision, mission, and proposed activities. However, this publicity attracted the attention of police...Organizers, unaware of the surveillance, openly reported details of their preparations, including funding sources, organizational situation, names of organizers (by pseudonym), supportive scholars, etc...The police successfully diverted the energy of the organizers from their real activist work, created mutual suspicion in the community, and destroyed the solidarity of women tongzhi community (2003: 8).

Indeed, I experienced that tales of the festival, the Beijing Sisters and its affiliated women still circulated, and it certainly informed attitudes to current networking. The 'making money' issue frequently came up, for example. Organizers' motives were questioned wherever money was involved, for instance when the Salon cover charge increased, or when the Xixiangfang bar introduced cover charge to enter a party. Was this about making money, doing business, getting rich, or about doing good for the lala community, women pondered. The moral subtext was one of representability, about being 'good lesbians', and by extension, 'good citizens'. At the same time, the emerging discourses of urban consumption, cosmopolitanism and the transformation of social norms, especially those relating to women's increased financial and social independence, mean that women's current prospects for upward mobility by educational and career attainment and hence, making money, has become a defining and socially accepted quality of cosmopolitan modern identity and urban citizenship – perhaps more so than sexual identity per se.

Generational differences are considerable here. In general, older women have worked out how to negotiate limits and possibilities for being open in their lives, some through conventional – or conventional-appearing – marriages, others by remaining single, and yet others through manipulating the non-confrontational impasse of 'saving face'/*mianzi* by having intimate



relationships with women but not discussing them or getting involved with ‘organized’ lala sociality. These tacit strategies rest a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ agreement.

The fact that the Tongyu network managed to achieve some degree of acceptance and even popularity over time seems paradoxical judging from the apparent negativity to organized activism and the risk of public exposure. Let me as a last point turn to consider Xingmian’s narrative about the Tongyu lesbian network, in order to further probe meanings of activism and sexuality in a Chinese context. When she got involved with social networking for Chinese lesbians in the US some years before she returned to China, she soon got interested in politics and “the rights issue”, as she put it. However, she quickly realized the importance of casual social events as well as activities focussing on political rights, and she appreciated the need and value for both, yet in different ways:

Personally, I became very interested in political rights and networking, and not so much in just ‘social gathering’. But of course social gatherings are important as a start, to break down the isolation. So when I started out in the US, I organized a couple of social events; in the end these gatherings were more like discussion groups, a bit like with the salon now, in fact. But after a little while, having organized these social events and set up Internet spaces too, which helped a lot in breaking down isolation, I felt that the problem was not about isolation anymore, but about rights.

The problem with ‘rights’ is that in the US for example there is this typical term to ‘fight for your rights’ and according to the American law. I thought that as a Chinese who was concerned with the situation in China, then if I wanted to do the right thing, I would have to go back to China to fight for the rights of Chinese lesbians in China... I was very inspired by meeting a Taiwanese lesbian in the US through the ITS who had over ten years of activist experience. She had a big influence on me because she was so dedicated to this kind of work. Previously I had never thought I would be an activist. And I used to absolutely hate politics and even the word ‘activism’. You know, when you learn about and experience politics in a Chinese environment [first], well of course you’re going to hate it!

Xingmian here outlines a version of ‘rights’ that better accommodate a Chinese cultural and political situation than in the US context she found herself in. The logical next-step for her was to return to Beijing to better carry this out. Interestingly, it seems that meeting a Taiwanese lesbian in the United States, provided considerable inspiration and support in helping Xingmian make the decision to return to China and ‘fight for the rights of Chinese lesbians in China.

However, while Xingmian had spent long periods in the US previously and had become involved with and interested in a decidedly US-based type of queer activism there, this did not mean that she tried to enforce such practices outright upon her return to Beijing. In fact, the gradual success of the Tongyu network probably hinged on the fact that she knew both Chinese and US queer and general culture inside-out and was able to draw on desirable aspects of both to an extent that did, over time, intrigue local women and enabled Tongyu to establish positive rapport. In particular, this happened through the completion of initial community projects such as a lesbian health survey, establishing the free-of-charge and increasingly glossy *Les+* zine, and hosting low-key activist events in connection with key dates like Stonewall remembrance day and Pride month/*jiaobao yue*, or lobbying for same-sex marriage rights.<sup>20</sup> Tongyu readily cooperated with Chinese HIV/AIDS advocacy groups and developed relations with various international NGO organizations with headquarters in Beijing; they cooperated with queer groups in the East Asian region, especially Hong Kong and Taiwan, and in regional cities on the Mainland; they welcomed government-sponsored research and university input, co-hosted talks on related themes with women’s rights and feminist groups, and with health officials and foreign expat and students involved in queer social groups in the capital.

Most Tongyu-affiliated women were younger university students who considered it important to ‘do something’ and, importantly, they harboured few if any memories of previous censorship and police interference such as the fated 2001 Culture Festival. Often living far away from natal home they worried less about being found out, and Tongyu events rarely risked public exposure by being confrontational and unequivocally ‘open’. Still, the group’s mission agenda as printed, bilingual, in leaflets were unmistakable in its call for considerable change: “...By public education and social advocacy, we aim to empower LGBT community, promote understanding

<sup>20</sup> Gardner, Dinah (2007) “China’s gays call for samesex marriage.” *Fridae* news: <<http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/printer.php?articleid=1857>>



among different groups of people, eliminate the discrimination based on gender and sexuality, and strive for the equal rights for LGBT and all women in China.”<sup>21</sup> Importantly, this equality agenda does not unilaterally point at the kind of ‘openness’ and ‘equality’ associated with US-Anglo-centric queer rights discourse; such an outright association with Western politics and rights discourse would prove highly problematic for Tongyu’s basic survival. Instead, Tongyu’s activities and public discourse emphasize good-natured, non-confrontational and apolitical language. Within lala community, Tongyu similarly emphasize an amicable merger of ‘fun’ and ‘organized’ activities and discussion. Overall, their approach feeds into mainstream and recognizable state-sponsored Chinese modernizing discourses and agenda. In turn, this primary connection with a collective national quest for progressive unity allows homosexuality to belong to post-millennial Chinese society, albeit on reticent margins.

#### **IV. Concluding remarks: Ethnography’s queer/ing sensibility**

In this paper I have attempted an ethnographically grounded discussion of queer studies in transnational sexuality scholarship. I started by identifying the ways in which the continued primacy of Anglo-US-centrism in queer studies retains certain disciplinary effects that marginalize alternative standards of sexual subjectivity and collectivity. I have aimed to expose the structures of power and knowledge in current dominant queer studies scholarship, which tend to re-produce Western queer identity and cultural regimes as primary and general against sexual alterities as secondary and particular. My ambition has first of all been to define the gains and insights of recent ethnography-based anthropological work on alternative sexualities and gender diversity. Ethnographic studies of sexuality and gender outside the Anglo-US-defined Western world add to our knowledge of the immense diversity of human sexuality. But more importantly, these studies destabilize current dominant categories and explanatory frameworks that have continued to frame queer studies in transnational and global contexts. I have asked what happens if we take alternative models and realities serious in queer studies. Part of my answer, hopefully emerging through the

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<sup>21</sup> “Our mission”, Tongyu leaflet, spring 2005





descriptive analysis of lesbian community and networking in Beijing, is that monolithic and hegemonic interpretations based on Western contexts as primary point and scale of reference, has limited usefulness. I have therefore argued the need for renewed attention to research methodologies and the process of producing knowledge.

To this end I have suggested that the research method of ethnography allows for a considerable perspectival shift. As Boellstorff argues, participant observation over time enables a decentring of “personal experience as the source of embodied knowledge...” (2007a: 15). In turn, ethnographic methods operate between and beyond systems of meaning (cf. Clifford, 1986: 2); ethnography positions alternative standards at the centre, and thereby challenges the common reification of queer studies as “a self-congratulatory exercise” (Boellstorff: *ibid.*). In this way, ethnographic research does not only critique current paradigmatic practices, truisms and indifference to alternatives, but actually re-turns the analytical focus to the limitations to the Anglo-US-centric framework. This resonates with the original intentions with queer theory to provide a new political and critical acumen to lesbian and gay studies. I have demonstrated this ethnographically by way of the example of contemporary community organizing and place making amongst lala-identified women in Beijing. Through the tropes of ‘fun’ and ‘organized’ modes of activism, and individual women’s affiliation with participation, community and identificatory categories, I have shown the complex interrelationships between different, yet co-existing, logics of lesbianism, national belonging, transnational queer sensibilities, and aspirations to participate in global queer cultures defined in context with cosmopolitan, urban consumerism and leisure.

The dynamics of relative visibility, openness, and rights discourse circumscribe lesbian collective life worlds to a complex extent that surpass conventional tradition-modernity readings. The dominant discourse of the ‘normal’ homosexuality that hinges on remaining relatively invisible in private, i.e. not open: keeping to yourself and avoiding a collective, public lala, has incorporated a notion of modern national/ist social belonging that employs *wenming*/civilizing and *suzhi*/quality aspects, to include ideal family relations and responsibilities. The dimension of openness and expression of queerness also remains relative, and certainly is not necessarily translatable to equal the direct, declarative, seemingly confrontational activist ideology of Western ‘coming out’ practices. Openness seems rather to be any act on the part of the queer-identified that



disturbs the impasse of *mianzi*/'face', the realm of invisibility and shadows (Liu and Ding 2005). This logic presupposes a socio-ethical balanced dynamics of keeping silent; breaking this gridlock has consequences for far-reaching relationships of belonging: from your immediate family and kin to cultural citizenship.

State-sponsored censorship and control over alternative socio-spatial formations further hinge on previous moments of direct violence and the prevailing threat of their repetition due to lack of legal protection; think for instance the mentioned clamp-down of the 2001 Lesbian Culture Festival and its aftermath. The memory and cultural myths surrounding these events amongst women concerned ensured an internalized privatization at most levels, and a fundamental reluctance towards community participation and representation. Thus, openness, being 'closed', and the reticent participation in lala life, whether 'just for fun' or volunteering with Tongyu for example, remained interweaved with place- and time-specific histories and cultural cosmologies in complex ways. Yet at the same time they constituted and were constituted by globalizing queer imaginaries that may be said to originate in Anglo-US cultural spaces - for example Pride events, Stonewall references, discussing and watching *The L Word* together - but they were strategically appropriated into local practices.

By offering a detailed examination of grounded ethnographic narratives in context with a critical appraisal of current theorizing on sexual globalization and queer studies, I have outlined major limitations to queer epistemologies. Ethnographic attention to situated everyday realities offers multifaceted "thick" data that enables effective re-thinking of received analytical paradigms. I maintain that it is a researcher's responsibility - ethically, intellectually, politically - to take up the challenging task to appropriate wider ranges of methodological and epistemological tools in order to foreground dialogue and conversation - at international queer conferences for example - and not merely implement predetermined hegemonic frameworks in the meeting with grounded realities in a globalizing world.



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Linn Sandberg  
Department of Gender Studies, Linköping University, Sweden  
linsa@tema.liu.se

### **The Old, the Ugly and the Queer: thinking old age in relation to queer theory**

#### Abstract

*This article seeks to use queer theory as a social theory and a critical challenge to normalcy all together to theorise old age in gender studies. Additionally the article discusses some implications of bringing old age into queer theory, where the able body, older person's sexualities in relation to heteronormativity, to mention a few things, are central for future queer theory. The red thread of the article is how the anti-social turn in queer theory and embracing shame may be used to critique the prevailing discourses of old age as either "successful" where the older person should be active and independent or old age as decline and decay. Queer theoretical notions such as failure and the abject are used to theorise old age and ageing bodies, but the article also discusses how some flexible bodies can overcome failures given class, sexuality, ablebodiedness and race etc. To perform in the Butlerian sense an intelligible and desired self is dependent both on gender, sexuality and age and this is in effect relying on certain modes of temporality. Queer temporality may thus challenge what is considered normal and good ageing but also reveal the taken for grantedness of normative time. The article concludes that by thinking queer theory and old age together a resurrection of knowledges is made possible, outside the good, successful and respectable old age.*

Keywords: old age, queer theory, ageing, abject, failure, queer temporality, performativity, positive ageing, successful ageing

#### **Introduction**

Rather than seeing queer theory as just a perspective of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people Michael Warner does in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer planet: Queer Politics and Social theory* (1994) argue for queer theory as a social theory with more far-reaching consequences than simply the inclusion of GLBT into the already existing social theories. With this and Judith Butler's proposition in mind that queer should be "a site of collective



contestations, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (Butler 1993, 223 and 228) this article is an attempt to reflect on how some key elements in queer theory may be interesting for further theorising and researching old age and ageing within the context of gender studies. The article moreover shows how queer theory can be further developed and rethought from the perspective of old age. A central argument of the article is how old age is shaped by two seemingly contradictory discourses, one positive discourse on ageing well and successful ageing and one on ageing as decline, both which spring from mid-life ageism. In an attempt to critique and challenge this the article discusses how queer theory’s turn to the anti-social and anti-identity<sup>1</sup> may be useful for thinking of old age as abject and imbued with negativity, and thus open to subversion and change. Another key argument is how gender performativity is not only linked to sexuality but also to age, and performing age is in turn connected to certain modes of heteronormative temporalities.

Though little discussed within gender studies and queer theory, age holds great potential for how to rethink sexualities, gender and embodiment. As Judith Kegan Gardiner proposes “age categories provide useful analogies for nonpolarized ways of conceptualizing gender”(Gardiner 2002, 91) and the non-dichotomous and fluid understanding of age is also in line with how queer theorists have tried to conceptualise sexualities. Sexuality as well as age is not static but changes over the life course, which could be seen as a central claim of queer theory. There are also parallels between the performative character of both age, gender and sexuality, where performing an aged and gendered/sexual self in coherent ways is crucial for being culturally intelligible. (cfr. Butler 1990). The reason for turning to old age and ageing in relation to queer theory is, however, above all a way to critically inquire into normativities and power. Age seems by many as utterly taken for granted; ageing is regarded as a process beyond the social. Still the discourses surrounding ageing shape bodies and subjectivities in an endless reiteration. Just as Wittig proposes that heterosexuality always goes unmarked so does mid-age (Wittig 1992). In focusing old age there is a risk of further making only old age into age; however I would argue that discussing and deconstructing old age may also be a means to critique ageism and the taken for

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to the anti-social I am referring to the anti-assimilationist and anti-modernist strand in queer theory which will also be termed embracing shame or turn to negativity. With anti-identity I am intending the rejection of identity politics which is central to queer theory (Jagose 1996).

granted norms around mid-life. A turn to age and ageing may moreover be useful for queer theory, looking at the changes, shapes and fluidity of bodies and desires. By taking the outset in old age, intersecting normativities of as well gender and sexuality as the able body come under scrutiny.<sup>2</sup>

To use the concept of old age is however not unproblematic, and within social gerontology there has been a turn to the notion of later life when discussing old age and ageing (for some discussion see Bytheway 1989). In this article, which is primarily a theoretical discussion, I have however chosen to discuss around the concept of old age rather than later life. My concern is primarily representational discourses rather than subjective, everyday and lived experiences of later life, and the notion of old age is regarded as a discourse into which individuals are interpellated or hailed. Interpellation coming from Louis Althusser (1971 [1970]) has in gender studies been employed by Judith Butler (1990) to discuss how individuals become viable as subjects through a discursive matrix of gender and heterosexuality. When discussing old age here I am regarding it as a discourse from which we become intelligible as subjects. To understand us as all being interpellated into age does not mean to deny real life experiences of old age, the social and physical changes throughout the life course. That growing old is an indisputable fact does not however mean that there is a unitary and given meaning to old age, as a discourse old age is aligned with expectations and assumptions around all aspects of social life as well as around the body. With the risk of reinforcing this very discourse that I seek to critique I find it necessary to centre my argument around old age, because it operates in society and is central for how we come to being as subjects.

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<sup>2</sup> It is however necessary to note the differences between queer and old age in order not to make false analogies. As Queer theorist and literary scholar Heather Love (2001) remarks queer theory's turn to shame and negativity is done in reaction to the affirmative history attempted by many Gay and Lesbian scholars. Love discusses how queer must develop a "politics of the past" that accounts for the stigma, shame and suffering which lies deeply embedded in the genealogy of queer existence. (Love 2001:496) Queer has sediments of negativity which cannot be overlooked. This history of shame is also relevant when race is concerned, and with both queer and black the very claiming of the shaming words "queer" and "nigger" holds a significant role. The analogies of queer and disability are also rather salient. Not only do both disability and homosexuality share a pathologised past, both are also in times of postmodernity and neo-liberalism connected to issues of visibility and tolerance. (McRuer 2006) Age is for one thing different in how many people will experience being as well as young also mid-aged and old. Age can in other words not be seen as ontologically equivalent to race and gender/sexuality and the turn to queer theory when studying age must take this into concern.

### **Queer negativity and positive successful ageing: introducing some central concepts**

Important to Queer theory has been its vehement critique of identity politics from around which much LGBT-studies have been centred. This critique seems plausible to apply also to studies of old age and later life. Research on old age seems in the vein of identity politics preoccupied with making visible the category of older (crf. Thompson 1994, Fleming 1999, Woodward 1999). This article however tries to critically deconstruct claims for visibility, recognition and assimilation of older people and look at how insights from queer theory may offer a different thinking of old age. In this article I am using the concept of “embracing shame” as discussed by Bond Stockton (2006) as a concept developed out of queer theory and activism’s anti-assimilationist approach. There is no inherent meaning in the concept, no straightforward way in how this is done. Rather embracing shame is a theoretical stand that seeks to deploy feelings of shame, negativity and disgust linked to queer identities and lives, but in my case also saliently linked to old age.

In the article the concept of “embracing shame” in relation to old age (and other intersecting categories such as disability and gender) is contrasted to discourses of “positive ageing” or “successful ageing”. To give a brief background: the concept of successful ageing holds a central and important position in social gerontology (in European context referred to as positive ageing or ageing well) and has won widespread recognition most notably since the Gerontological Society of America made it a theme of their 1986 annual meeting (Torres & Hammarström 2006). While much contested and critiqued successful ageing nevertheless captures a very important strand in social gerontology, to increase people’s potential to age well.

Central to the debates around successful ageing are Rowe & Kahn with their seminal work “Human aging: usual and successful” (1987). To Rowe & Kahn successful ageing is equated with low risks of disease, physical functioning and active engagement with society

(Rowe & Kahn 1997). Other things that have been associated with successful ageing within social gerontological debate are activity, generativity, autonomy, capacity for self care and reaching one's potential (Torres 2001). Rowe and Kahn's definition of successful ageing has met strong critiques deeming it too narrow (Torres 2001) and the concept has also met critiques for its universalistic stance with a strong western template (Torres 2001, 2003, and Hammarström 2006). In relation to class Featherstone & Wernick (1995) have pointed to the middle class bias of the understandings of successful ageing, where only those who can partake in consumerist practices to lessening the effects of bodily decline can become successful. There has in the 1990's been a shift in the social gerontological debates of successful ageing from an emphasis on "what" successful ageing may imply to "how" successful ageing can be achieved, various strategies for optimising potentials for ageing well (Baltes & Baltes 1990). There has in addition been a turn to discussing the concept in terms of how older people themselves understand "successful ageing" (Torres & Hammarström 2006).

Despite the contestations and critiques of the concept and the shift away from the more normative definitions of what ageing well may imply the concept has seeped into other discursive arenas outside the social gerontological field. As Katz notes the idea of ageing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as positive is widespread, and grey political activists as well as community workers and policy makers now embrace positive ageing (Katz 2001/2002). The reason for going into the debates of successful ageing is to get a background and understanding of the notions of positive and successful ageing and what has been associated with the term. The discourses I am referring to in this article are not confined to the social gerontological field but encompass massmedia, policy making and more. From hereon I primarily using the notions of positive discourse or discourses of positive ageing for rhetorical reasons to juxtapose to the queer theoretical embracing of negativity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The use of the word successful in successful ageing has been critiqued for its American pedigree and for its implication that ageing is a contest which you may actually fail. Using positive ageing is thus also a way of encompassing a broader and non-american context. It is in general worth considering the context from which I am writing, which is a western but more specifically a Scandinavian context. Scandinavian scholars have in recent years discussed the specific Anglo-American origins of a great deal of queer theory. Questions have been raised to what extent the specific history and culture of the Scandinavian countries influence the way we can use queer theory. I think this is well worth keeping in mind, but it is however not something I intend to discuss further. When thinking of old age it is also noteworthy that Scandinavia has been shaped by Social-democrat welfare models throughout the

The article concurs with the critical voices labeling positive ageing possible only for some and a discourse built on a oxymoronic notion, where ageing well is equated with resisting ageing (Torres & Hammarström 2006). I start out by further contextualizing old age in neo-liberal consumerism society and then propose thinking through the abject to deconstruct and critique discourses of positive ageing. Moving on with the queer theoretical arsenal I discuss failure and how failed performativity can be a way of thinking of old age. I am subsequently discussing heteronormativity in relation to old age before finally suggesting that discourses of positive ageing may be deconstructed through queer temporalities.<sup>4</sup>

### **Embracing shame: old age and the abject**

The contemporary shift to positive notions of old age has not entailed an abolition of ageist discourses, and old age as decline and decay have continued to co-exist alongside the positive discourses of old age (Torres & Hammarström 2006, Katz 2001/2002, Calasanti & King 2005). There is a very complex and at times contradictory understanding of old age and ageing bodies which is at stake in late modernity shaped at the nexus of ageist discourse, neo-liberal and consumerist culture and a progressivist agenda. While social gerontologists have raised caveats against the positive discourses, arguing that who may age positively, successfully and well is dependent on class, ability, race and ethnicity the turn to queer theoretical notions of “embracing shame” and the abject may offer further ways to critique and rethink positive discourses of old age.

Ageing and ageing bodies today are constructed in relation to neo-liberalism, consumer culture and progressivist thought (Twigg 2000, Faircloth 2003, Featherstone & Hepworth 1991).

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20<sup>th</sup> century. Influence of neo-liberalism has been somewhat less than in comparison with the U.S., though this is rapidly changing with the restructuring of the welfare state. State financed health and care services are however available to all older citizens to a greater extent than in the US. Noting the context is also important for understanding how nation state and whiteness is constructed in older people’s lives.

<sup>4</sup> The inspiration for this article springs from the work with my dissertation on older men and experiences of embodiment and sexuality in the lives of older men. Though this article does not specifically focus on masculinity and men many of the examples I draw upon come from studies on older men. In order to avoid reinforcing “an absent presence” of men and men’s bodies I am urging the readers to keep this in mind. My intent is to highlight the invisibility of the hegemony, heterosexual men, and what the role of old age is in this normative position.

Neo-liberalism has co-opted the social gerontological “ageing well” (Gross & Blundo 2005) and successful ageing, where the older person should take responsibility over one’s ageing and be active in shaping one’s life in retirement which are fitting with neo-liberal imperatives of productivity and generativity (Laliberté Rudman 2006 ). Discourses on sexuality in later life are in addition influenced by a consumerist version of ageing well through the advent of Viagra where “sex for life” is promoted (Potts et. Al 2006). Sexual activity should continue as one age as a part of “ageing well” and doing successful ageing. For men this involves being sexually active and virile, to continuously be able perform an intelligible masculine sexuality where erection and ability to penetrate are essential features (Marshall & Katz 2002, Gross & Blundo 2005). Gregory Gross & Robert Blundo argue that the medicalisation of male sexuality with the introduction of Viagra has been paralleled by a commodification and commercialisation, where male sexuality has been “deprivatized” (Gross & Blundo 2005). Consumer culture has all over had an indisputable impact on the shaping of ageing bodies in late modernity. Material goods and continuous working on the body are required in a culture where there is a preoccupation with perfection and where the body becomes a vehicle for pleasure (Twigg 2000). Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner (1991) purport in their influential theorising on bodies in late modernity that the ascetic work on the body is now not rewarded spiritually but materially through a marketable self. To resist ageing and to work on the body in order to diminish signs of ageing thus becomes a crucial part of how ageing is handled in a neo-liberal consumer culture. Ageing is regarded as a form of moral laxity, (Featherstone 1991) something which consequently has caused a cultural paranoia; “ an endemic fear of ageing”. (Gulette 1998) This fear of ageing is not solely a concern of the old but a disquiet also among youth and permeates our culture as a whole (Schwaiger 2006).

Parallel to this positive ageing discourse and indeed intermeshed in this is a discourse that signifies ageing with decline and decay, in which old age is linked to passivity and frailty, and the ageing body is connoted with negativity. (Schwaiger 2006, Laliberté Rudman 2006, Twigg 2000). The discourses of neo-liberalism, consumerism and progressivism discussed above promote resistance to this passivity and decline through active choices, working on the body etcetera. These positive discourses of ageing are however to a great extent dissonant with lived

experiences. As Gross & Blundo argue the “ageing well” discourse being accompanied by youthful active bodies is a distorted picture of men’s experiences of ageing where ill health often is a reality, which is also true to older women’s lives (Gross & Blundo 2005). Julia Twigg also notes that the mundane and everyday experiences are little researched in social gerontology and in a vein of progressivism permeating social policy the negativities of the body are often effaced (Twigg 2000).

The shift to positive ageing did not wipe out these connotations of ageing and decline, rather there is a new package to a prevailing ageism. As Toni Calasanti and Neil King argue successful ageing implies “not aging and not being old because our constructions of old age contain no positive content” (Calasanti & King 2005, 7). Stephen Katz is in the same vein pointing to the role of consumerism in this stating: “ideals of positive aging and anti-ageism have come to be used to promote a wide-spread anti-aging culture, one that translates their radical appeal into commercial capital” (Katz 2001/2002, 27). There is seemingly a resemblance between the assimilationist discourses on homosexuality and on old age, where being old does not have to be a negative thing as long as you live life like you used to live it. (The assimilations version in relation to homosexuality would be we tolerate that you are gay as long as you live a respectable coupled life like us the heterosexuals). The shift to the term “senior” instead of “old” or “elderly” when discussing older people represent this attempt to reverse connotations of old age as decline and negative. Another example is the formation of the Swedish National Association “To age is to grow”<sup>5</sup>. The name of the association tries to signify old age not as decline but as a positive phase and a time to increase one’s potential, and the aim was to mould opinions that the “older can”. However taking part in and continuously constructing a positive discourse on ageing like in this case do not necessarily diminish the effects of ageist discourses of ageing as decline. Rather as Denise Laliberté Rudman shows in her analysis of discourses on the successful retiree in Canadian newspapers, the shaping of some older persons as successful is done in relation to those who fail to become autonomous, responsible and independent retirees (Laliberte Rudman 2006). Some older persons are in other words continuously constructed as frail, victims and problematic. And as Calasanti & King (2005) argue, class influences who is

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<sup>5</sup> “Att åldras är att växa” was a joint project between Swedish NGOs formed in the 1990’s.





shaped as successful and who is not, and I would add that ability, sexuality and race are also influencing who can age successfully. Thus the queer theoretical rejection of positive ageing discourses as a an emerging site for rethinking age seem interesting and fruitful; rather than trying to assimilate to “positive” norms of mid-life which are unattainable to many seeing the possibilities of negativity.

The discourses of positive ageing which were introduced by Rowe & Kahn (1987, 1997) and others to some extent were meant to reverse the connotations of ageing with decay and decline (and as Torres 2006, notes had some positive effects on research on ageing in how it separated ageing from disease) can nevertheless be regarded as problematic in how they are creating norms of activity and active choice attainable only for some older, but also in how they efface “negativities” most notably of ageing bodies. However, ailments and disabilities as well as inability to control one’s bowels and urine leakages are realities for many people in old age. Hence, I will open up for a discussion of the old body as abject and how queer theory proposes the abject as a site for subversion. The abject has in feminist theory been much related to femininity. Drawing on Freud and the development of shame feminist theorist have argued that women’s inability to control their bodily fluids and leakages have rendered them abject and consequently subordinate (Kristeva 1982, Grosz 1994).<sup>6</sup> But this is also translatable to older people’s bodies which frequently in high old age suffer from incontinence. The abjection of the ageing body is also caused by its closeness to death and decay. To Kristeva the abject is the non-wanted, what the body falls away from, constituting pollution or dirt and the abjection in the form of bodily waste is at its extreme the horror of the corpse (Kristeva 1982). Older persons and bodies of old age as linked to death and dying could therefore in many instances be in the furthest position of the abject. However what is interesting is how the combination of old age and gender may challenge the feminist theorist understanding of only femininity as abject. Differences in old age may diminish and ageing may make older persons more androgynous (Silver 2003). Accordingly the abject leakages as usually connected to femininity and female subordination may be related to older men and their bodies. Older men’s bodies could be seen as abject and queered through leakages and failures in old age.

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<sup>6</sup> To Sigmund Freud, the child’s learning to control his/her bowels generates the development of feelings of embarrassment, shame and disgust and in relation to gender (Grosz 1994).



The concept of abject and abjection has played a significant role for the development of queer theory. Schwaiger writes on abjection in relation to gender:

Abjection here is a response to an ambiguous form of signification, a signification that does not refer to culturally accepted gender norms, but that through its very ambiguity of performance throws these culturally cherished norms into question. Abjection is dangerous because it is always ambiguous, and is therefore seen as (merely) transitional.” (Schwaiger 2006:28)

The ambiguity and fluidity and the consequent possibilities of change and subversion is possibly what has made abject such a pivotal notion in queer theory. Judith Butler’s usage of abject has proven highly useful for explaining the instability of the heterosexual matrix and how the abject in this case the homosexual is required as a signifier of the heterosexual, yet always threatening (Butler 1990, 1993). In abjection there is not only exclusion but abjection also serves as a challenge: “what disturbs identity, system, order” (Bond Stockton 2006:13). To Butler, the abject serves the very promise of subversion in how it despite its impossibility and unintelligibility continues to exist; the abject is the disruption to the ongoing reiteration of heterosexuality (Butler 1990, 1993). The abject has in addition been linked to the queer theoretical notion of debasement. “‘Abject’ is ‘of the lowest degree, ‘lacking in self-respect; degraded’. It’s synonym is ‘base’” (Bond-Stockton 2006:12). What perhaps has become apparent in the discussion of the<sup>7</sup> abject is how it also is very linked to corporeality. The links to shame, embarrassment and disgust so inherent in abjection are very much connected to bodily matters, with the rectum as in the classic queer theoretical work “Is the rectum a grave?” by Leo Bersani (1987) being the most obvious corporeal connotation.

Following my argument above, that old age and ageing is still connoted with negativity and degradation I would suggest that the embracement of shame and the turn to negativity has a lot to offer the theorising of old age. The neo-liberal discourses on how to become a successful, independent and autonomous retiree has evident parallels to an assimilationist and neo-liberal strand acknowledging gay and lesbian existences as long as they adhere to heteronormative

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<sup>7</sup> Not abject is an example of debasement, a notion that plays a significant role in queer theory.

ideals of non-promiscuity, coupledness etc. The main reason why “embracing shame” and employing the concept of abject in relation to older people is that ageism cannot be challenged with positive discourses of successful ageing. What may then “embracing of shame” involve in relation to old age? It seems as if the body is at the very centre of this. Urine and faeces incontinence, disabilities, erectile dysfunction are some of the bodily matters that may cause shame and stigma in older persons. But also mental abilities such as forgetfulness or senile dementia are stigmatising older persons, leading to negative stereotyping. In the next section I discuss the notion of failure as a way to embrace negativity and theorise old age, both in terms of failing to do one’s age properly but also in terms of failing bodies.

### **Performativity and failure: old age and the body**

To further employ queer theory towards thinking of old age outside positive ageing this section will discuss performativity and failure in relation to gender and age. Just as gender is crucial for being intelligible within the realm of the social so is age. The possibility to become a subject is dependent on one’s ability to perform gender, but also to some extent age. Schwaiger inspired by Butler’s theories on performativity suggests: “bodies that do not (or cannot) normatively perform their age weaken the category of age by the ambiguity inherent in their performance” (Schwaiger 2006:26f). And Schwaiger argues that the ageist norms which make the body in old age viable can be challenged in performative acts; “ageist perceptions of older people *can* be changed over time by the ways in which people perform age” (Ibid. 2006:31).

The role of failure holds a very significant position in queer theory and critiques of heteronormativity. Essentially heterosexuality needs to be continuously reiterated but this reiteration is always under threat of disruption. Failing to do proper man or woman, which is intrinsically linked to heterosexuality, leads to abjection. But as I have noted earlier on abjection, this very failure is also a challenge and opens up possibilities for change. There is a very complex relation between failures in relation to gender and failures in relation to age. On the one hand, failing to perform one’s age could imply a failure to perform an intelligible and culturally

acceptable gender. On the other hand, rejecting the interpellation of age may be a way to adhere to hegemonic gender constructions, like maintained virility of men. It is important here to see that failures have essentially different meanings in the lives and ageing of men and women.

Older women have received some attention from a gendered perspective, where often the demands on older women to handle their appearance in relation to youthful beauty ideals are discussed (Woodward 1999, Krekula 2006, Hurd 2001, Paulson&Willig 2008). Where this research is much focused on the empirical and everyday lived experience the representational aspects of older women and the theoretical implications of older women's bodies are less discussed. The old, sagging, leaky, female body could in many instances be regarded as the very quintessence of the abject. Mary Russo's (1994) discussions of the grotesque are very interlinked with the abject and the old woman's excessive and unbounded corporality could be regarded as one form of the female grotesque. Turning to queer studies, older women's sexuality and normativity are little discussed. I would argue that older women as abject and failed gender performances of older women are very much linked to sexuality and the body. I am particularly interested in heterosexual older women who seemingly comply with imperatives of heteronormativity but still fail to perform a desired (and intelligible) feminine self. One example is the older woman who in wearing for example short skirts, leopard skin tights, excessive jewellery and make up disrupts codes of dress for older women. As Twigg notes older people's dress are framed within a moral climate and dress becomes a way to police and regulate older women's bodies in relation to sexuality (Twigg 2007, 295). Older women dressing in overtly sexual manners risk being labeled and castigated not only as "an old slag" but also as "mutton dressed as lamb" (Ibid.296, Fairhurst 1998). This expression conveys how heterosexual displays in older women can be deemed failures, given their inability/unwillingness to perform their age. Being heterosexual and feminine in the right way accordingly involves adjusting to age norms. Adjusting to one's age is also about adjusting to heteronormative modes of temporality, and those who can or do not are failures in relation to age and gender performativity.

Failures of the ageing male is much less evident than failures of ageing females, with strong connotations with the abject. Failure is however just as salient for theorising the role of the older man, for whom the risk of being stigmatized for not acting one's age however is less

linked to sexual propriety and appearance than for women. Rather older men's failures are connected to the failing body, where erectile dysfunction or the failed erection is of central importance. The emphasis on the erect penis being able to penetrate, holds a very central place in the heterosexual matrix. The problem to get and hold an erection has been renamed from impotence to erectile dysfunction and has changed from being perceived as a psychological matter to a medical issue (Marshall & Katz 2002). The advent of Viagra and other similar medication have added to a pathologising of erectile problems and late modern discourses proclaim that the prevalence of impotence among men is high and even more widespread among older men. This pathologisation of erectile dysfunction in late modernity can be understood from a Foucauldian perspective as a disciplining and regulatory function of male heterosexuality and reinforcement of normalcy of the erect penis.

Failure becomes a linking concept not only between gender, sexuality and old age but also with the able/disabled body. Failures of the body in old age can be understood in relation to McRuer's "Crip theory". "Crip theory" as a radically social constructivist social theory suggests links between heterosexuality and ability, as normativities that both have to be constantly reiterated. The genealogical roots of heteronormativity can be traced to Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980) and McRuer argues that we may also talk of "compulsory able-bodiedness". Able-bodiedness is contingent on disability just as heterosexuality depends on homosexuality. The invisibility or "non-identity" of heterosexuality, highlighted by Monique Wittig, (1992) is consequently just as salient for able-bodiedness. To be able-bodied is simply to be, in the sense that it is an invisible norm and naturalised. The doing of the able-body is however under constant threat of failure, just as the making of heterosexuality is always under the risk of failure (McRuer 2006). Crip theory suggests that the able body is never fully attainable and bringing in an age perspective to this shows further how our bodies always at some point risk failing us. The changes of the body in old age pose a vital threat to the maintenance and achievement of the able-body and denial of disruptions of the body. In one way or another all bodies tend to fail us, illnesses and disabilities of old age being blatant proof of this. Looking more closely at older men, it is possible to theorise erectile dysfunctions as failed



erection and consequently a way to deconstruct male heterosexuality as well as male able-bodiedness.

Old age must, however, be understood in all its complexity where the range spans not only over many generations but also over variety of race and class positions as well as concerning different abilities, sexualities and genders. Feminist and queer scholars have contended that those who cannot comply with norms on gender and sexuality and cannot show coherence between gender and sexuality are ultimate failures (cfr. Love 2001). It is therefore clear that in old age there are some people who are considered failures in several and different respects whereas for others the effects of failing bodies in old age are minor and repairable. It is in other words impossible to juxtapose the failures of an old transsexual to an old heterosexual man and one therefore needs concepts to explain what enables some older persons to overcome failure. McRuer's crip theory draws on Emily Martin's notion of "flexible bodies" (McRuer 2006:16) which could be a way of understanding how failures may be repaired for some. The context of the flexible bodies are postmodernity, neo-liberalism and late capitalism and relating to my earlier discussion of positive discourses on successful retirees emerging in a neo-liberal context it is plausible to see "the successful" as non-failed but flexible. The Swedish discourses on the successful retiree in many ways coincide with white able-bodiedness, heterosexual masculinity and a bourgeoisie class position and the successful retiree seemingly hold a flexible body in how he manages to "perform wholeness through each recurring crisis" (McRuer 2006, 17). Flexible bodies in old age manage to come out as "successful retirees" after disruptions such as retirement but also after bodily failures such as illness. Viagra as a product of postmodernity and late capitalism here occur as a tool to shape these flexible bodies, giving stamina and firmness to the failing floppy penises and making possible repetition of able-bodiedness and desired heterosexuality in old age.

From this it is apparent that old age may not necessarily marginalise men, rather intersections of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness together with whiteness and a middle class position or higher in older men may render them flexible bodies and consequently resist failure (relatively). Though heterosexuality plays a significant role in the flexibility of the body, what is interesting is how heteronormativity and desired heterosexuality is regulated in relation to age.



As I discussed earlier in relation to old women as “grotesque” and the failed impotent older man, performing a sexual self in desirable and culturally intelligible ways is very much about performing a particular aged self. Taking the outset from those failures may then be an intersectional way of thinking old age and the various power asymmetries it may involve.

### **Heteronormativity, desirability and the old**

As discussed above the complexity and various intersections of power at stake in relation to old age must be taken into account when thinking queer theory in relation to old age. When sexualities of older persons are discussed the picture is very dual. On the one hand older people are regarded as asexual, sexual desires are thought to diminish as one ages (Silver 2003). On the other hand, within the late modern discourses on how to “age well” a continued (hetero)sexual activity in later life is stressed. (Gross & Blundo 2005) Given how heteronormativity as a social structure, a social contract, regulates and influences all spheres of society it also informs how sexualities of older persons are perceived and labelled normal or deviant (Wittig 1992, Warner 1994). As Warner notes: “ ‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (Warner 1994:xxvi). Turning to the work of Gayle Rubin, who has played a central role for the development of queer theory not least in how she has redirected the focus from the binary of homosexual/heterosexual, understanding heteronormativity involves how desires and sexualities are differently hierarchised and rendered desired/undesired (Rubin 1984). Intimacy, love and coupledness are some very pivotal aspects of heteronormativity. Regulations against inter-racial and inter-generational sexual relations are other important strands. Age as a social category consequently plays an important role in how heteronormativity functions.

Not least is the dual picture evident when it comes to older men’s sexuality. The stigma of impotence is one aspect that has been highlighted in research on masculinity, ageing and sexuality (Marshall & Katz 2002, Potts et al. 2006, Gross & Blundo 2005 Calasanti & King 2005). Sexual (coital) activity in older men is hence seen as desirable. The sexual desirability of heterosexual men is not only visible in Viagra-discourses proclaiming successful ageing through



maintained erection but also in how heterosexual men are regarded as sexually desirable for significantly younger women. Older men's maturity seemingly renders them a sexual social capital. The actor Sean Connery embodies this discourse of the older mature heterosexual man as sexually desirable. The sexual desirability of Connery is captured in the catch phrase of a whiskey commercial Connery is starring in, "Some age, others mature".<sup>8</sup> In the commercial Connery teaches his young (Bond) self to enjoy whiskey and meanwhile a beautiful young woman waits outside the door eager to come in. The innuendo of the commercial is very clear: Connery remains sexually desirable to the younger woman given his maturity. Consequently old age doesn't necessarily diminish sexual attractiveness in older men as they are related to the discourse of ageing as maturing.<sup>9</sup>

Parallel to these representations and discourses on older heterosexual men's sexuality is the cultural representation of the "dirty old man" (Calasanti & King 2005). This discourse talks of an insatiable male sexuality that will not be stemmed to what is appropriate for an older man. How this negative stereotyping can exist alongside the representation of older men as sexually desirable I suggest can be understood in relation to heteronormativity and its intersections with age and masculinity. Older men's and women's sexual activities that take place within a heterosexual monogamous relationship are regarded as healthy and increasing one's well-being in later life. The label "dirty" old man however conveys something of the non-wanted, as we've come to understand dirt from Mary Douglas much cited *Purity and danger* (Douglas 1966) dirt is the wrong thing in the wrong place. The dirty man is then the man who is sexual in wrong ways, falling out of the heterosexual matrix. This goes also for "the old slag" who is connoted with promiscuity. Following my discussion on embracing shame it is possible to embrace the "old slag" as a feminist and anti-ageist strategy. One may however enquire if an embracing of the stereotype of the dirty old man is possible and what this might mean for challenging of heterosexist heteronormative masculine sexuality emphasising erection and penetration that pervade in old age.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIzSki7ZcTM> (2007-11-13)

<sup>9</sup> As I have noted elsewhere (Sandberg 2007), love and sexual relationships between old men and younger women has received little attention in the studies of older men and masculinities. It is however not only on a representational level that older heterosexual men are sexually desirable, Ginn & Arber (1993) note how men are considered desired dating partners at older ages than women, who earlier lose their 'attractiveness'.

### **Ageing through Queer Temporality**

The article has so far argued for how queer theory's embracing of shame may become a challenge to ageist discourses in which only the "successful" old are promoted. Seeing old bodies as abject and failed, looking at age and gender performativity in relation to failure opens up for a whole different thinking of ageing and normativity. I have also argued for how heteronormativity must be rethought, seeing sexualities of older people as on the margins of the heterosexual matrix. As I have purported throughout the article queer theory offers a radical rethinking of life and society and following Foucault queer theory implies a "resurrection of knowledges" (Foucault 1997). In this final section before concluding I will argue for how the dominant yet contradictory discourses on successful old age and old age as decline is linked to certain modes of temporality

To understand temporality and what "queer temporality" may imply it is plausible to turn to Judith Halberstam. In Halberstam's words "part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" (Halberstam 2005, 2). This means in effect that queer lives who are not centred around birth, child-raising and are lived in the shadow of HIV/Aids make visible the taken for granted and the contingency of what one may perceive as normal life course and ageing. Halberstam discusses two modes of heteronormative time "time of reproduction" and "time of inheritance" (Halberstam 2005). Living along the modes of these temporalities involves following a life course linked to work, reproduction and a long and healthy life in retirement. Living along these temporalities is essential for doing "successful ageing" and becoming the desired retiree. As I have noted, heterosexuality in itself is a stipulation but not a guarantee to be comprised at the core of heteronormativity. The failures of old people to perform a desired gendered sexual and aged self go beyond the queer and include the old woman dressed in clothes inappropriate for her age, the dirty old man but also the drug addict. Not only is it enough to work and reproduce, longevity of

life is in itself important since, as Halberstam argues, we “applaud the pursuit of a long life” and pathologize those who do not wish to live long but like for example drug abusers “live in rapid bursts” (Halberstam 2005:2). Ironically an overwhelming part of the older population in the West are dependent on prescribed drugs for their every day existence, perhaps following the pathologisation of old age. This haze of drugs is however incorporated into a normative temporality of old age, whereas taking drugs as leisure is condemned. Remaining active when old is in general regarded as ageing well and successful ageing. But gerontologists schema for assessing activities among the older are often morally charged with the exclusion of activities such as gambling, drinking (Katz 2000). Morals are thus rigidly framing the lives of older, deeming what activities are appropriate, in relation to everything from sexuality to hobbies and dress. In other words: bourgeois respectability forms firm boundaries for what is intelligible and desirable temporality and consequently who can become a proper subject.

My earlier discussion on flexible bodies and who can avoid becoming a failed older person is in essence related to how one follows certain temporalities. There is in the positive discourses of “ageing well” an intersection of discourses on class, sexuality, ability and gender which makes up a normative framework for how life course and ageing is done. This affects and shapes the everyday lives and experiences of older people, how one can or cannot live one’s life.

### **Concluding remarks**

In an increasingly neo-liberal, consumerist and progressivist Western society old age is framed within two dominant discourses which are seemingly at odds with each other, old age as decline and “the positive ageing” where old age is connoted with remaining active, autonomous and responsible as well as mature. Both however stem from the same ageist and mid-life perspective where old age cannot contain any positive content (Calasanti and King 2005). Queer theory’s turn to negativity and embracing shame can be seen as a way to deconstruct these ageist discourses and theorise old age differently. Regarding old age as performative in a similar way to gender moreover opens up a discussion of the role of failure in relation to age. Not being able to



perform one's age has consequences also for one's gendered self albeit differently for men and women. Sexuality plays a central role in this and queer theory's discussions on heteronormativity and hierarchisations of sexualities could well be used also to discuss sexuality and old age. To include ageing and old age further in queer theory may in addition be a way of expanding and rethinking notions of normalcy and sexuality, where the discourse so pervasive on older people's sexuality; asexuality, needs a whole lot more attention. The discourses of positive ageing, how to become a successful retiree are based upon an understanding of ageing as a form of moral laxity, an inability to control and perform a desirable self, and moral discourse is on the whole very strong in relation to old age. These pre-given and naturalised moral codes of old age may be challenged through queer temporalities revealing the constructed nature of the life course framed by time of reproduction and time of inheritance. In conclusion a turn to queer theory may not only confront ageism but imply a resurrection of knowledges springing from the old, ugly and the queer.

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Judith Halberstam  
Tel Aviv

## **The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies**

### **1. The Anti-Social Thesis**

Recent work in queer theory under the influence of Leo Bersani's definition of sex as anti-communitarian, self-shattering and anti-identitarian produces a counter-intuitive but crucial shift in thinking away from projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation and towards what can only be called an anti-social, negative and anti-relational theory of sexuality (Bersani, 1986; Bersani, 1996). I call this shift "counter-intuitive" because it upends our understanding of the interconnectedness of intimacy, romance and sexual contact and replaces it with a harsh but radically realistic recognition of both the selfishness of sex and its destructive power. The sexual instinct then, within this formulation, nestles up against the death drive and constitutes an oppositional force to what Bersani terms "the tyranny of the self" (Bersani, 1999: p.4). Rather than a life-force connecting pleasure to life, survival and futurity, sex, and particularly homo-sex and receptive sex, is a death drive that undoes the self, releases the self from the drive for mastery and coherence and resolution; "the value of sexuality itself," writes Bersani, "is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it" (Bersani, 1997: p. 222). Bersani's work, while it clearly situates itself in relation to a very well defined canon of gay male aesthetic production by Jean Genet, Marcel Proust and others, has also been useful for the theorization of femme receptivities (Cvetkovich, 2003) and butch abjection and lesbian loneliness (Love, 2007). And the politics of Bersani's project, to the extent that one can identify a political trajectory within a radically non-teleological project, reside its brutal rejection of the comforting platitudes that we use to cushion our fall into mortality, incoherence and non-mastery.

My own recent work is profoundly influenced by this particular strand of queer theory and in a book in progress on the politics of knowledge, I try to capitalize on counter-intuitive and



patently queer forms of negative knowing. In chapters on stupidity, forgetting, failure and illegibility, I try to expose the logic of the binary formulation that damns certain modes of knowing to the realms of negation, absence and passivity and elevates others to the status of common sense. Stupidity, of course, forms a backdrop for the heroic enterprise of wisdom, and failure provides an abject realm that success must counter. Similarly, forgetfulness is constituted as a kind of entropic force that must be halted by rigorous memory practices. But in each case, the under-privileged category actually sustains purposive and intricate modes of oppositional knowledge, many of which can be associated with and linked to forms of activity that we have come to call “queer.” The book works through a series of exemplary texts drawn from popular culture, dyke avant-garde culture and subcultures and links queer critique to negativity and to an oppositional politics which has both anti-racist and anti-capitalist dimensions.

## **2. Punk Negativity**

Lee Edelman’s book, *No Future*, makes perhaps the most powerful and controversial recent contribution to anti-social queer theory (Edelman, 2005). Edelman’s polemic describes the rejection of futurity as the meaning of queer critique and links queer theory to the death drive in order to propose a relentless form of negativity in place of the forward looking, reproductive and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects. The queer subject, he argues, has been bound epistemologically, to negativity, to nonsense, to anti-production, to unintelligibility and, instead of fighting this characterization by dragging queerness into recognition, he proposes that we embrace the negativity that we anyway structurally represent. Edelman’s polemic about futurity ascribes to queerness the function of the limit; while the heteronormative political imagination propels itself forward in time and space through the indisputably positive image of the child, and while it projects itself back on the past through the dignified image of the parent, the queer subject stands between heterosexual optimism and its realization. At this political moment, Edelman’s book constitutes a compelling argument against a US imperialist project of hope, and one of the most powerful statements of queer studies’



contribution to an anti-imperialist, queer counter-hegemonic imaginary and yet, I want to engage critically with Edelman's project here in order to argue for a more explicitly political framing of the anti-social project.

While Edelman frames his polemic against futurity with epigraphs by Jacques Lacan and Virginia Woolf, he omits the more obvious reference that his title conjures up and that echoes through recent queer anti-social aesthetic production, namely "God Save the Queen" as sung by *The Sex Pistols*. While *The Sex Pistols* used the refrain "no future" to reject a formulaic union of nation, monarchy and fantasy, Edelman tends to cast material political concerns as crude and pedestrian, as already a part of the conjuring of futurity that his project must foreclose. Indeed, Edelman turns to the unnervingly tidy and precise theoretical contractions of futurity in Lacan because, like Lacan and Woolf, and unlike the punks, he strives to exert a kind of obsessive control over the reception of his own discourse. Twisting and turning back on itself, reveling in the power of inversion, Edelman's syntax itself closes down the anarchy of signification. In footnotes and in chiasmic formulations alike he shuts down critique and withholds the future and fantasies of it from the reader. One footnote predicts critiques of his work based upon its "elitism," "pretension," whiteness and style and the footnote projects other objections on the grounds of "apolitical formalism" (Edelman, 2005). He professes himself unsympathetic to all such responses and having foreclosed the future, continues on his way in a self-enclosed world of cleverness and chiasmus. Edelman's polemic opens the door to a ferocious articulation of negativity ("fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Is and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop" [29]) but, ultimately, he does not fuck the law, big or little L, he succumbs to the law of grammar, the law of logic, the law of abstraction, the law of apolitical formalism, the law of genres.



### 3. Anti-Social History

The anti-social thesis as articulated by Edelman and Bersani, as Bersani himself notes, does not spring from nowhere – rather, there are early versions of an anti-communitarian homophilia in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. In general, however, we have favored a far more liberal understanding of gay and lesbian identity and, in the liberal Euro-American context, modern gay and lesbian history has favored a narrative about progressive enlightenment within which the same sex couple emerged into liberation towards the end of the twentieth century by throwing off the tyranny of inversion (tyrannical because it presumed heterosexual structures of desire) and by inhabiting non-variant gender identities and refusing role play (Chauncey et al, 1989). Within this same narrative, gays and lesbians are marked as heroic norm-resisters, always part of a social movement or a proto-political group and always somewhat at odds with respectability, decency and domesticity. This narrative, as Michel Foucault argues forcefully in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, is appealing, compelling, convincing...and utterly wrong. While it is very much “to the speaker’s benefit,” (Foucault, 1980: p. 6) as Foucault cheekily puts it, to tell this kind of story about the remarkable emergence of sexual minorities from the tyranny of repressive regimes, it is also another self-congratulatory, feel-good narrative of liberal humanism that celebrates homo-heroism and ignores the often overlapping agendas of the state and homosexuals, or the family and homosexuals, or decency and homosexuals

In fact, while Foucault replaces this romantic narrative of gay/lesbian resistance with the concept of the “reverse discourse,” we must also trace multiple genealogies for contemporary lesbian/gay/transgender movements only some of which overlap with other radical projects and alternative politics and many of which dovetail with a politics of decency, racialized projects and masculinist enterprises committed to buttressing state power and emphasizing the gendered distinctions between public and private. The apolitical anti-social agenda, I will be arguing in this section, cuts both ways and while it mitigates against liberal fantasies of progressive enlightenment and community cohesion, it also coincides uncomfortably with a fascist sensibility as we will see.



One of the main markers of homosexuality, gender variance, has often marked the site of some of the most energetic disagreements between homosexuals about the political meaning of their sexual preferences – and while for women, the meanings of transgender identifications are read in relation to a feminist project, for men, cross-gender identification as often registered a dividing line between masculinist homosocial agendas and more radical queer politics. When Euro-American medical discourse, under the influence of a psychoanalytic focus upon sexual aim and object choice, shifted gender variance out of the category of homosexual and recognized a new subject position in the transsexual, the continued link between gender variance and homosexuality was cast as anachronistic and either pre-political or socially deviant (Chauncey, 1989). Indeed, as early as the 1920's in Germany in particular, homophile movements made vigorous distinctions between male effeminacy and female masculinity, for example, and a form of homosexuality that involved gender normative partnerships. Gender normative partnerships between men in Germany in the first part of the century actually dovetailed, as various scholars have shown, with the exaltation of masculinism within National Socialism.<sup>1</sup> I will return to this shortly. Male and female cross-gender identification have had different relations to gender politics, masculinism, negativity and domesticity. In fact, we can trace some contemporary feminist mistrust of female-to-male (FTM) gender variance back to the early twentieth century when female masculinity was cast, by Otto Weininger and others, as, simultaneously, a sign of the collapse of gender distinctions and, by implication, civilized society, and a marker of female genius (Weininger, 1903). Early feminists had to fight against social constructions of femininity as passive and weak while guarding against the notion that when they were active and strong, they were masculine or manly. So, while the masculine woman might be cast as socially deviant and possibly criminal in some circles, in others, she was accepted as superior to her feminine and weak sisters – Gertrude Stein, for example, embraced eagerly the ideas of Weininger because it gave her a rationale for her genius and its relationship to her masculinity (Katz, 1978). Stein was not troubled by the anti-feminism or anti-semitism of Weininger, on the contrary, she found it to

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<sup>1</sup> This association is not so latent and in fact is the topic of a painting by Attila Richard Lukacs, a Canadian painter known for his striking and monumental portraits of homoerotic skinheads – “Amorous Meeting” (1992) depicts two muscular and semi-naked skinheads giving a Hitler salute to the setting sun while embracing. A swastika features prominently in the image and casts a long shadow over the poppy field that stretches between the men and the sun.



be a relief. And Stein could easily be folded into the apolitical anti-social agenda of Edelman and Bersani with her refusal to make sense and to mean in any conventionally clichéd ways.

As for the effeminate man, he was viewed by many as a traitor to a politics of virility and as someone who had betrayed patriarchal fraternity. In early twentieth century Germany, indeed, where the patriarchal state, male bonding and homoerotic fraternity were cast as continuous with one another, the effeminate or cross-identified man was vilified by all sides. The Nazi state, as Dagmar Herzog has argued in *Sex After Fascism*, was opportunistic in its official relation to homosexuality and while sometimes it was convenient to turn a blind eye to the homoerotic bonding within the SA, at other times, it was politically expedient to persecute homosexuals (Herzog, 2007). But the effeminate homosexual was persecuted in Nazi Germany both for his rejection of heterosexual family and for his embrace of the feminine. Some German homosexuals also set themselves up in opposition to gender “deviants” and the effeminate man was seen by them as someone who disrupted the “Gemeinschaft der Eigenen” or the “Community of the Special,” a fraternity of masculine homosexuals.

Andrew Hewitt writes about the early politics of masculinism in a difficult but important chapter titled “The Philosophy of Masculinism” in *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism & The Modernist Imagination*. Here, he relates the history of male homophile movements in pre-War Germany that emerged in response to the encouragement of homoerotic bonds within Weimar Germany and early Nazism – “masculinism,” as he calls it, responded to a totalitarian impulse for “a liberation of the whole body” and the celebration of the male body within all-male brotherhoods. Emancipation, for the masculinist, in this context meant the separation of men from women, the reduction of women to nature and biology and the elevation of man to culture and politics. The masculinism of early homophiles coincided with conservative emphases on the superiority of male community and with a racialized rejection of femininity. Indeed, male Jews, for these early homosexual anti-social activists, were seen as men who had been made effeminate by their investments in family and home – a realm that should be left to women – and they made connections between the Jews and effeminate homosexuals as men who have not lived up to their virile duty to remain committed to other masculine men and to a masculine public sphere.



“Tuntenhass,” or the hatred of effeminate homosexuals, says Hewitt characterized these masculinists and allowed them to imagine themselves as radical because they viewed male effeminacy as a reproduction of patriarchal understandings of gender polarity. In Hewitt’s account, masculinists like Hans Blüher, a champion of homosexuality and *Männerbunde* and the founder of the male-only youth group *Wandervogel*, were taken with Freudian explanations of erotic drives because Freud moved away from biological explanations for homosexuality and towards cultural explanations. The male, according to Blüher’s brand of masculinism, rises above the herd (race) and the family (woman) and finds his primary bonds with superior men on behalf of superior men – and so, bonds between men surpass racial and familial bonds. Despite the acceptance of Freudian concepts, the masculinists still cast Jews as anachronistic – as stuck in a past political moment that must be eliminated in order to move on to a glorious and totalized contemporary future of men and man-power. This homosexual masculinist future depended upon a commitment to sameness rather than otherness, to the self not the other – and within this trajectory, the Jew and the gender variant man represent the failure of the political project of masculinism.

Like Leo Bersani’s elaboration of a non-redemptive politics in *Homos*, Hewitt’s work is interested in refuting a wholly liberal tradition of reading homosexuality back through radical social movements. He wants to remember a far **less liberal tradition of homophilia** from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and from Germany in particular, in order to unpack the relationship between eros and politics and to see that eros is not always and everywhere a force for good that has been met by negative and repressive power. Hewitt asks us to think of homosexuality as a historically specific phenomenon not a continuously resistant movement and so he proposes provocatively that we ask the question: “what was homosexuality for?” politically speaking and at any given historical moment (81) rather than asking how it was repressed or gained recognition and acceptance.

Within these genealogies we can find tensions between same-sex and gender variant traditions of queer activism and identification. Of course, it is not possible to argue simply that homophile movements from pre-Nazi Germany echo through contemporary gay male masculinist movements, and yet we should theorize contemporary gay male politics of vigorous



masculinity and anti-domesticity at least in part in relation to their historical antecedents rather than only in relation to the radical homosexual movements of the 1960's. And, it also seems important to note the presence of earlier tensions between feminists and female-to-male transgender subjects even though those tensions do not flow easily into contemporary arenas of disagreement. Suffice to say that tensions about the meaning of gender-variant and gender-stable versions of homosexuality have a long history and that history has criss-crossed the anti-social agenda. The politics of masculinity, as opposed to the politics of gay social movements or the politics of gender variance, names a political strand that can easily incorporate forms of female and male masculinism while casting all feminine identification as a source of inferiority and as contrary to the nation state.

#### **4. A Queer Politics of Negativity**

I am arguing then that we need multiple genealogies of gay/lesbian/trans history in order to sort through the multiple political projects that have been called queer or gay during the 20<sup>th</sup> C. And that we need to think carefully about the problems with a progressive and positive liberal agenda and about the potentially sinister associations that can be drawn between apolitical negativity of the kind Edelman outlines and the masculinist anti-domesticity and anti-reproductive politics of homophile movements in the 1930's with Nazi sympathies.

And yet, I remain drawn to the politics of negativity but want to articulate it differently than Edelman and Bersani. So what does or would constitute the politics of "no future" and by implication the politics of negativity? The Sex Pistols, we may recall, made the phrase "no future" into a rallying call for Britain's dispossessed. In their debut song, written as an anti-celebratory gesture for the Queen's silver jubilee, *The Sex Pistols* turned the National Anthem into a snarling rejection of the tradition of the monarchy, the national investment in its continuation and the stakes that the whole event betrayed in futurity itself, where futurity signifies the nation, the divisions of class and race upon which the notion of national belonging depends and the activity of celebrating the ideological system which gives meaning to the nation



and takes meaning away from the poor, the unemployed, the promiscuous, the non-citizen, the racialized immigrant, the queer:

“God save the queen/She ain’t no human being/There is no future

In England's dreaming...Oh god save history/God save your mad parade/ Oh lord god  
have mercy/All crimes are paid. When there's no future/How can there be sin/

We're the flowers in the dustbin/We're the poison in your human machine/We're the  
future your future. ..God save the queen/We mean it man/And there is no future/In  
England's dreaming...No future no future/No future for you/No future no future/No  
future for me.”

No future for Edelman means routing our desires around the eternal sunshine of the spotless child and finding the shady side of political imaginaries in the proudly sterile and anti-reproductive logics of queer relation. It also seems to mean something (too much) about Lacan’s symbolic and not enough about the powerful negativity of punk politics. When *The Sex Pistols* spit in the face of English provincialism and called themselves “the flowers in the dustbin,” when they associated themselves with the trash and debris of polite society, they launched their poison into the human. Negativity might well constitute an anti-politics but it should not register as apolitical.

There are many examples of anti-social theorists in a feminist context or in post colonial contexts and these are writers who articulate the scope of an explicitly political negativity: we can think here of Valerie Solanas and Jamaica Kincaid but also of the performance art of Marina Abramovicz and Yoko Ono. Jamaica Kincaid’s novels oppose the optimism of the Colonial vision with a ferocious voice of despair, refusal, negation and bleak pessimism and Valerie Solanas articulates a deeply anti-social politics which casts patriarchy as not just a form of male domination but as the formal production of sense, mastery and meaning. Abramovicz and Ono both perform a version of feminism that locates femininity in the negative territory of masochism, passivity, vulnerability and castration.

1) Jamaica Kincaid's Colonial Rage: In a recent *interview about Autobiography of my Mother*, Kincaid was told: *Your characters seem to be against most things that are good, yet they have no reason to act this way -- they express a kind of negative freedom. Is this the only freedom available to the poor and powerless?* Kincaid answers: "I think in many ways the problem that my writing would have with an American reviewer is that Americans find difficulty very hard to take. They are inevitably looking for a happy ending. Perversely, I will not give the happy ending. I think life is difficult and that's that. I am not at all -- absolutely not at all -- interested in the pursuit of happiness. I am not interested in the pursuit of positivity. I am interested in pursuing a truth, and the truth often seems to be not happiness but its opposite"<sup>2</sup> Kincaid's novels do indeed withhold happy endings and she adds the fine shading to the narrative of colonialism by creating characters who can never thrive, never love and never create precisely because colonialism has removed the context within which those things would make sense. In *Autobiography of My Mother*, for example, Kincaid provides her readers with a motherless protagonist who, in turn, does not want to be a mother, to reproduce under colonialism or to claim kinship with her colonized father. She opposes colonial rule precisely by refusing to accommodate herself to it or to be responsible for reproducing it in any way. Thus the autobiographical becomes an unwriting, an undoing, an unraveling of self. Kincaid concludes an interview about the book, which the reviewer has called "depressing" and "nihilistic" by saying: "I feel it's my business to make everyone a little less happy."

B) Valerie Solanas and the War on Men: A worthy goal and one to which radical feminist Valerie Solanas dedicated her life and work. Solanas recognized that happiness and despair, futurity and foreclosure have been cast as the foundations of certain forms of subjectivity within patriarchy and she relentlessly counters the production of "truth" within patriarchy with her own dark and perverted truths about men, masculinity and violence (Solanas, 2004). For Solanas, patriarchy is a system of meaning that neatly divides positive and negative human traits between men and women. Solanas inverts this process casting men as "biological accidents" and at the

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<sup>2</sup> "Jamaica Kincaid Hates Happy Endings," interview in *Mother Jones* by Marilyn Snell (Sept./October 1997).



same time refusing to take up the space of positivity. Instead she colonizes the domain of violence and offers, helpfully, to cut men up (SCUM) in order to demolish the hegemonic order. While straight men are walking dildos, gay men or faggots embody all the worst traits of patriarchy because they are men who love other men and have no use for women. In the manifesto this is called "faggotry" and men are supposed to both fear and desire it. For Solanas, men, in all forms, are the enemy and there is no such thing as a male rebel; Solanas famously made theory into practice when she took a gun and shot Andy Warhol for "stealing" a script from her. While we might be horrified by the anarchic violence of Solanas's act, we also have to recognize that this kind of violence is precisely what we call upon and imply when we theorize and conjure negativity.

C) Abromovicz and Ono and Radical Passivity: Yoko Ono's nine minute performance "Cut Piece" involves the artist sitting on stage while members of an audience come up and cut pieces of her clothing off. The audience is mixed but as the performance unfolds, more and more men come to the stage and they become more and more aggressive about cutting her clothing until she is left, semi nude, hands over her breasts, her castration, vulnerability and passivity fully on display. How can we think about time, identity, femininity, masochism, gender, race, display, spectatorship and temporality in this piece? What is the self that comes undone in 9 minutes for an audience and is it feminist? What is the time of action? What is the time of passivity? How can we think about this refusal of self as an anti-liberal act, a revolutionary statement of pure opposition? Marina Abomovicz has performed similar acts of unbecoming – a piece where the audience is invited to use various objects on her in any way they please for example. Both artists use the performance stage as a way of engaging the murderous impulses of audiences against women, against artists, against self.

If we use "radical passivity" as another anti-social mode, we can begin to glimpse its politics. In a liberal realm where the "pursuit of happiness," as Jamaica Kincaid might say, is both desirable and mandatory and where certain formulations of self (as active, voluntaristic, choosing, propulsive) dominate the political sphere, *radical passivity* may signal another kind of refusal, the refusal quite simply to be. While many feminists from Simone de Beauvoir to



Monique Wittig to Jamaica Kincaid have cast the project of “becoming woman” as one in which the woman can only be complicit in a patriarchal order, feminist theorists in general have not turned to masochism and passivity as potential alternatives to liberal formulations of womanhood. Carol Clover famously cast male masochism as one explanation for the popularity of horror films among teenage boys and we might similarly cast female masochism as the willing giving over of the self to the other, to power (Clover, 1992); in a performance of radical passivity, we witness the willingness of the subject to actually come undone, to dramatize unbecoming for the other so that the viewer does not have to witness unbecoming as a function of her own body. Indeed, radical passivity could describe certain versions of lesbian femininity. Judith Butler’s work on the “lesbian phallus” argues for the recognition of the potentiality of masculine power in a female form but this still leaves the feminine lesbian unexplained and lost to an unphallic modality (Butler, 1993). The anti-social dictates an unbecoming, a cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate; and a radical passivity allows for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference.

The radical understandings of passivity that emerge within Marina Abramovic’s and Yoko Ono’s work, not to mention in Faith Wilding’s legendary piece “Waiting,” all offer an anti-social way out of the double bind of becoming woman and thereby propping up the dominance of man. The feminist archive of the anti-social, needless to say, looks far different than the gay male archive deployed by Bersani, Edelman and countless others.

### **5. Size Does Matter: Tiny Archives**

The real problem, to my mind, with this anti-social turn in queer theory, then, has less to do with the meaning of negativity – which, as I am arguing, can be found in an array of political projects from anti-colonialism to punk to avant garde feminism – and more to do with the excessively small archive that represents queer negativity and the concomitant attachment to a pure and positively queer past. Even as authors like Edelman and Bersani commit whole-heartedly to a politics of anti-futurity and anti-redemption, still they trace their anti-social project through a



heroic archive of literary texts by Genet and others rather than the quite dismaying archive of anti-social, masculinist, transphobic sexism as articulated by German homophiles. The gay male archive preferred by Edelman and Bersani oddly coincides with the canonical archive of Euro-American literature and film and furthermore, it narrows that archive down to a select group of anti-social queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts: it includes then, in no particular order: Tennessee Williams, Virginia Woolf, Bette Midler, Andy Warhol, Henry James, Jean Genet, Broadway musicals, Marcel Proust, Alfred Hitchcock, Oscar Wilde, Jack Smith, Judy Garland, Kiki and Herb but it rarely mentions all kinds of other anti-social writers, artists and texts like Valerie Solanas, Jamaica Kincaid, Patricia Highsmith, Wallace and Gromit, Johnny Rotten, Nicole Eiseman, Eileen Myles, June Jordan, Linda Besemer, Hothead Paisan, *Finding Nemo*, Lesbians on Ecstasy, Deborah Cass, Sponge Bob, Shulamith Firestone, Marga Gomez, Toni Morrison, Patti Smith and so on.

The gay male archive because it is limited to a short list of favored canonical writers is also bound by a particular range of affective responses. And so, fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity and camp make up what Ann Cvetkovich has called “an archive of feelings” associated with this form of anti-social theory. But, this canon occludes another suite of affectivities associated, again, with another kind of politics and a different form of negativity. In this other archive, we can identify, for example: rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, over-investment, incivility, brutal honesty and so on. The first archive is a camp archive, a repertoire of formalized and often formulaic responses to the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity. The second archive, however, is far more in keeping with the undisciplined kinds of responses that Bersani at least seems to associate with sex and queer culture and it is here that the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed. Dyke anger, anti-colonial despair, racial rage, counter-hegemonic violences, punk pugilism, these are the bleak and angry territories of the anti-social turn; these are the jagged zones within which not only self-shattering (the opposite of narcissism in a way) but other-shattering occurs.





The anti-social archive must also be an archive of alternatives, however, and it must mix high and low, known and unknown, popular and obscure; and this archive where the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed. By way of a queer conclusion and as a gateway to thinking of the queer alternative or anti-anti utopianism, let me give an example of a low cultural text with an anti-social bent and a radically alternative vision: the new Disney feature *Over the Hedge* dramatizes a dialectical stand off between some woodland creatures and their new junk food consuming, pollution spewing neighbors. As the creatures awake from the winter hibernation, they discover that while they were sleeping, a soulless suburban development stole their woodland space and put up a huge wall or hedge, a partition indeed, to fence them out. The creatures, raccoons and squirrels, porcupines and skunks, turtles and bears, band together to destroy the colonizers and to refuse the suburbanites depiction of the woodland dwellers as “vermin.” The band of creatures even features a Hegelian possum that plays dead when in danger and explains to his daughter wisely: “Playing possum is what we do. We die so we may live!” Ultimately, this children’s feature offers more in the way of a vision of collective action than most independent films and critical theory put together and the film’s conclusion points to queer alliance, queer space and queer temporalities as the answers to the grim inevitability of reproductive futurity and suburban domesticity.

## **6. The Queer Alternative**

In my work on “alternative political imaginaries,” the alternative embodies the suite of “other choices” that attend every political, economic and aesthetic crisis and their resolutions. Queerness names the other possibilities, the other potential outcomes, the non-linear and non-inevitable trajectories that fan out from any given event and lead to unpredictable futures. In *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, social historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker trace what they call “the struggles for alternative ways of life” that accompanied and opposed the rise of capitalism in the



early seventeenth century. In stories about piracy, dispossessed commoners and urban insurrections, Linebaugh and Rediker detail the modes of colonial and national violence that brutally stamped out all challenges to middle-class power and that cast proletarian rebellion as disorganized, random and apolitical. Linebaugh and Rediker emphasize instead the power of cooperation within the anti-capitalist mob and they pay careful attention to the alternatives that this “many headed hydra” of resistant groups imagined and pursued. We need to craft a queer agenda that works cooperatively with the many other heads of the monstrous entity that opposes global capitalism, and to define queerness as a mode of crafting alternatives with others, alternatives which are not naively oriented to a liberal notion of progressive entitlement but a queer politics which is also not tied to a nihilism which always lines up against women, domesticity and reproduction. Instead, we turn to a history of alternatives, contemporary moments of alternative political struggle and high and low cultural productions of a funky, nasty, over the top and thoroughly accessible queer negativity. If we want to make the anti-social turn in queer theory, we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate, and, to quote Jamaica Kincaid, to make everyone a little less happy!

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François Briatte

Della Porta, Donatella and Michael Keating (eds)(2008) *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN-13: 9780521709668 (pbk). 384 pp. RRP: £19.99.

*Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* is advertised by its publishers as a “revolutionary new textbook” and, even though the book aims at describing existing approaches rather than transcending them, it will certainly strike the postgraduate student (its first intended audience) as a remarkably up-to-date, concise and legible discussion of current methodologies and theoretical frameworks of social inquiry. What might qualify as “revolutionary,” and for which the editors deserve the highest credit, is the book’s success in presenting a truly pluralist perspective of possible research techniques, ranging from ethnographic methods (chap. 15 by Zoe Bray) to game theoretic analysis within Bayesian frameworks (chap. 8 by Christine Chwaszcza), along with a detailed discussion of current epistemological considerations in social and political research. Having read a few chapters in close-to-final draft form as their respective authors posted them on personal electronic pages, I was pleased to read the remainder of the book in paperback form, even more so at a relatively inexpensive price by current market standards.

Enthusiasm is probably not the first feeling conveyed by the literature on research design and methodology, as a lot of it is plagued by the joint and recurring issues of redundancy and low cumulation. Specifically, the need to achieve a careful balance between theoretical and practical issues in methodological texts makes it a difficult exercise to write concisely and intelligibly on that topic, as every student who has submitted his or her board paper (or research design extended essay) is critically aware of. As Peter Mair notes in his chapter on concept formation (chap. 10), no radical approach to such issues can take credit for producing the best research outputs: while precise and coherent conceptualisations are an essential requirement of



academic endeavour, “immutable definitions” and overly strict standards lack the “pragmatism and flexibility” which research calls for in practice (p. 196).

There is more than one way of resolving the dilemmas of research design (see, for instance, Martin 2008), and one of the merits of *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* is to prove this thesis right through a detailed examination of existing approaches and methodologies. In addition to their personal accounts, the authors also supplement their contributions with further pointers to the most insightful existing texts, with multiple references to the works of John Gerring, David Collier or Gary Goertz, to name only a few. By that virtue, the book also constitutes an excellent starting point from which to delve into the methods of social inquiry.

As its title suggests, the book is divided into two broad categories that deal respectively with the epistemological approaches (chaps. 1–9) and methodological designs (chaps. 10–16) that support social inquiry. Each section gives different treatments to critically important orientations of research methodology. Case selection, for instance, is examined by both Donatella della Porta and Philippe Schmitter. In the first case (chap. 11), the author contrasts the purposive nature of case selection in small-N research with the statistically-inclined tradition of randomization and strictly-no-interference approach to dependent variables (see King, Keohane and Verba 1994). In the latter case (chap. 14), the author briefly examines how empirical instances from the material world can become cases, through property specification and attention to comparability. Readers of the *Oxford Handbooks of Political Science* (such as Goodin and Tilly 2006 or Moran, Rein and Goodin 2006) will recognize several chapter headings from the first section: institutional and cultural constraints, ideational perspectives, etc. — just as readers acquainted with the Palgrave series in *Political Analysis* (such as Burnham et al. 2008 or Marsh and Stoker 2002) will easily browse through the methods exposed in the second section.

The book finishes with a synthetic essay jointly authored by the editors on the balance and respective merits that characterise the different approaches to social science research. Their reflection addresses critiques of triangulation and pluralism on the grounds of epistemological incommensurability between existing methodologies. In Chapter 2, they provide a detailed answer to such critiques and adequately dismiss non-purposive forms of methodological



eclecticism, where multiple methods betray uncertainty and incomplete research designs. Instead, the authors claim that “there is scope for synthesis, triangulation, multiple perspectives and cross-fertilization,” insofar as “different methods can be equally valid, depending on the question we are asking” (p. 322). One might regret that the authors do not emphasize the richness of nested research strategies (see, for instance, Lieberman 2005), except for a brief mention in Philippe Schmitter’s chapter (p. 278). Their main argument, nevertheless, is both clear and persuasive: well-formed questions about the past and present state of affairs of the material world should lead researchers towards precise approaches to their research problem (a process acknowledged in the French research tradition as identifying one’s *problématique*, although that term unfortunately lacks a clear definition). Readers struck by the importance of social science concepts as an essential tool in the intellectual exploration of — and travel between — research questions, problems and analytical angles will find Peter Mair’s discussion of concept formation a particularly interesting and enlightening read in that respect.

The pluralistic perspective in support of which Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating present such a compelling case takes its roots in the culturally and methodologically diverse environment of the European University Institute in Florence, where the book was crafted. Against this backdrop, their final essay rightly stresses the weight of national specificities, observing that “relatively young disciplines as sociology and political science still reflect the impact of different disciplines that nurtured them” (p. 317). A challenge for the postgraduate student may then be to take stock of such national proclivities and depart from them as soon as they begin to prove counter-productive in terms of diminishing attempts towards originality and innovation within research designs. Overall, and with respect to the large scope of issues covered by the book, *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* stands out as an excellent, comprehensive contribution to the existing (and vast) literature on research methodology. The book seems a very apt candidate for the bookshelves of virtually any social scientist.





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Julia DeLeon

McGarry, Molly (2008) *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press. ISBN: 978-0-520-25260-8 (hbk). 288 pp. RRP: £16.95.

*“A ghost is a visitation from the past to the present... it is worth asking why, in certain historical moments, people need to speak with the past”*

(McGarry: 20).

Molly McGarry's *Ghosts of Futures Past* contends that the Spiritualist practice of communicating with the dead was more than trend and trickery. Instead, it “offered the potential for affective connection across time, personal transformation, and utopian political change” (pg 8). In her study of this popular 19<sup>th</sup> century religious practice, she explores how ghosts were thought to speak through mediums, typically young women, and how their words were heard as having both religious and political import. Further, despite the contemporary perception of Spiritualist belief as “an easily parodied parlor game or an apolitical and marginal mysticism,” she offers Spiritualism here as potentially, if not inherently, non-normative and anti-binaristic: “[calling] into question the very categories of the material and immaterial, knowledge and belief, the living and the dead” (p. 8).

McGarry's text is by necessity nuanced and complicated, as it engages the tension between the religious and secular in 19<sup>th</sup> century culture and politics. The complexity of her reading of extensive primary and secondary sources yields more than a straightforward historical account of Spiritualism. For example, while examining the troubling trend of ventriloquizing minoritarian figures, presented in Chapters 1 & 2, McGarry also maintains the possibility that the young women giving these ghosts a voice were able to utilize their own voices in unusual and transgressive ways. The radical potential that McGarry locates in Spiritualism, both bodily and temporal, thus offers an unexpected and powerfully suggestive queer archive, as well as an object lesson in the potential to be found in such overlooked archives. By taking the impulse to



speak to the dead seriously, she opens the reading of Spiritualism to contemporary queer scholarship, allowing her to analyze the ways in which the Spiritualist movement functions in relation to contemporary desire for the words and wisdom of ghosts.

Situating the beginning of Spiritualist practice in 1848, the same year *The Communist Manifesto* was published, McGarry makes it clear that she is interested in Spiritualism as more than a “cultural footnote,” and in haunting as “more than a dead metaphor” (p. 1, 8). Drawing from Avery Gordon’s seminal *Ghostly Matters* (1997), the book is positioned as part of a recent body of work being pursued in relation to ghosts/the ghostly/ghosting in fields of queer and critical race scholarship. It insists on the importance of “taking the lived experience of being haunted seriously” (p. 8). While the book does expose the techniques used by Spiritualist mediums and photographers, showing the proverbial man behind the curtain, McGarry is not merely interested in finding out the tricks and lies which made Spiritualism possible. Rather, she endeavors to take Spiritualism and its followers seriously regardless of the truth of the mediums’ words. This, in turn, allows her to delve into the question which drives her research: “why, in certain historical moments, people need to speak with the past,” and what can be gained from these ghostly voices (p. 20).

McGarry gestures toward the answer to these questions in the five chapters that follow. In Chapter 1, “Mourning, Media, and the Cultural Politics of Conjuring the Dead,” she outlines the history of emerging Spiritualism and its crucial figures in more detail. The historical context of the movement is illustrated both in the concurrent development of technologies such as photography and the telephone, and in the distanced temporal and ideological position it held from the Victorian culture of mourning. Following the introduction of the mediums with those purportedly speaking through them, Chapter 2, “Indian Guides: Haunted Subjects and the Politics of Vanishing,” then explores the implications of the persistent channeling of Native American ghosts by Spiritualist mediums. While this practice clearly exploited the popular conception of Native American spirituality, McGarry notes that Spiritualists were also vocal and active in advocating for the assertion of Native American rights. Her careful presentation of such seemingly contradictory stances speaks to her interest in the radical potential of Spiritualist practice, rather than a flat critique.



In Chapter 3, “Spectral Sexualities: Free Love, Moral Panic, and the Making of U.S. Obscenity Law,” the creation of obscenity law is explored as a reaction to the non-normative Spiritualist ideals of gender and sexuality. The latter were widely circulated in Spiritualist periodicals and newsletters and spoke directly to the non-Spiritualist fear of possession and the dangerous permeability of the home. These dangers are further explored in Chapter 4, “Mediomania: The Spirit of Science in a Culture of Belief and Doubt,” through the relationship of Spiritualist mediums and medicine in the emerging nineteenth century discourse of abnormality and mental health. Importantly, Spiritualist mediums were historically pathologized as akin to hysterics, which McGarry utilizes to account for the therapeutic interest in the psyche and soul. This Foucauldian turn to the institution casts Spiritualist practice in a new light and offers a glimpse of the movement’s future fall from popularity to parlor game. Chapter 5, “Secular Spirits: A Queer Genealogy of Untimely Sexualities,” explicitly finds the potential for queer Spiritualism in “the more uncanny, the more spectral sexualities that haunt the queer past,” as embodied in oft-claimed queer ancestors Walt Whitman and Radclyffe Hall (p. 175). It is in this last section that McGarry casts a new light on the book’s discussion by stressing the potential to be found in speaking with dead voices, positing that Radclyffe Hall’s famous Stephen Gordon, commonly read as a queer ancestor, is therefore made “a martyr to the future” (p. 175).

While Chapters 1-4 present a complex and thorough historical analysis and offer political and theoretical implications of Spiritualism, in questioning the book’s relationship to its use of dead voices, Chapter 5 explicitly unlocks the wider relevance of the book, not only as a non-normative history, but to the practice of queer theory. Though she is reading for a queer understanding of this movement, McGarry writes against the “persistent urge to find queer ancestors before there was anything like a queer history to recover them” (p. 175). Therefore, this last chapter of the book functions as a beautiful and subtle critique of queer genealogical impulses and the now common urge to offer queer predecessors as “martyr[s] to the future” (p. 175). Using Whitman and Hall, both of whom had an interest in Spiritualist ideologies, McGarry underlines the parallels between the potentially troubling Spiritualist tendency to speak for minoritarian figures through the mouths of young white women, and the contemporary impulse



to hear the equivalent of contemporary queerness in the work of writers like Whitman and Hall. McGarry is not seeking to ventriloquize here, but rather to locate these writers' own interest in Spiritualism in relation to their own queer present.

According to McGarry, the research for this book was impelled by an attempt to make sense of the politics of mourning necessarily engaged by scholars and activists in the AIDS pandemic. "Spiritualists felt the burden of the present, and the call of both the future and the past... Spiritualist practice collapsed time and refused to accept the past as over" (6); McGarry is looking to Spiritualist practice to make sense of the shocking losses caused by AIDS, and the political and perhaps spiritual impulse to let the dead speak. In fact, in recounting Spiritualist practice and writing for voiceless ghosts, McGarry herself can be seen to become a Spiritualist practitioner. However, by enabling her ghosts to speak to their own present, she allows and maintains a productive, provocative tension in her reading of Spiritualism; her interest is not in making any more martyrs. This temporal collapse and the desire for the voices of ghosts to speak to the present is used to explore Spiritualism's relevance to contemporary queer scholarship and experience. It is portrayed as, "a spiritual [theory] of embodiment and [form] of materialization that offered what secular science refused: transfigurative affiliation, consolation, and connection" (176). Ultimately, these are fundamental comforts that, in today's world can- crucially- still be heard and understood.

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Ben Chia-Hung Lu

Lisa, Rofel. (2007) *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. ix + 251 pp. RRP: £13.99

China's contemporary development has successfully caught the eyes of people on the world stage. Following the economic revolution of the late 1980s, it has been at the forefront of global capitalism's drive into Asia. As historian Wang Hui (2004) claims, following the events of the 4th of June 1989, neo-liberalism was successfully injected along with global capitalism into Chinese society, effectively becoming one of China's major contemporary ideologies. For Wang, neoliberalism in the post-socialist era has, on the one hand, aided the State to ease itself out of a legitimate crisis and, on the other, played an important role in unlocking people's desires towards the global dream (ibid., 56). David Harvey (2006) has further stressed the contradictory characteristics of China's neo-liberalism. He argues that, whilst neo-liberalism seems to support market logic in order to privatize everything into the marketplace, the autocratic power of the Chinese State has never diminished in relation to engagement with that same market. Wang and Harvey's important observations raise a set of questions that Lisa Rofel's book, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (2007), aims to answer, mainly: how is such a contradictory logic of neoliberalism enacted in Chinese people's daily lives today, and how do people interpret neoliberalism in contemporary China?

In Rofel's latest book, the pioneering Western anthropologist of Chinese culture combines rich field work data with extensive cultural theory. She carries out an ambitious investigation of how public culture, gender and sexuality have been dramatically renovated under China's neo-liberalism. Maintaining a skeptical and critical stance of Harvey's Marxist interpretation of neo-liberalism, Rofel aims to capture how rapid development and global dreams have profoundly altered the public and private life of China. She does so by drawing together the strands that weave State and sexuality into the fabric of neo-liberalism.

In terms of public culture, Rofel explores how Chinese people, especially women, began to argue over the importance of personal desire or individuality through the popular 1980's TV soap drama, *Yearning*. Basing her analysis on audience-interviews, Rofel found that *Yearning* became a nation-wide phenomenon due to its post-socialist allegory in China today. Its narrative justified the harsh past of the Cultural Revolution while recapturing the importance of individual freedom today. By relating to this context, *Yearning* opens up to the new age of individuality and the freedom of personal desire in public culture. Rofel emphasizes the role its 1989 re-broadcasting played as one of the strategies used by the Chinese State to minimize its governmental crisis and to ease the anxiety amongst many of its citizen in the post-4th of June 1989 context. It was that same year that the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping, officially announced the removal of a ban on foreign capital investment. This allowed for the rest of the world and its global capital to become involved and invest in China.

Having elaborated on this politico-economic and cultural background, Rofel then moves on in the second part of her book to inspect how global capital and its neoliberal logic intricately embodies the sexuality issues of contemporary Chinese society. She illustrates how neoliberalism reshapes queer politics in China and also how queer citizens in this context perform sexuality through class-related issues. From my perspective, this constituted the most stimulating part of the story being told within the book. By performing interviews with 'money boys' (gay men sex workers) and queer rights activists in China, Rofel develops her core arguments: "To be sure, what it meant to be a gay in 1990s China was nothing if not about crossing cultural and national borders" (Rofel 2007, 94).

By combining this point of view with an analysis of the dominant neo-liberal logic, she helps the reader capture a more holistic sense of China's changing social circumstances. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese post-socialist allegory requires maintaining the memory of a difficult past in place in order to justify the importance of individuality for Chinese people today. It is in this sense that, for the younger generations, pursuing sexual freedom could be one of the most important elements in their claim of being an authentic part of the age of individuality. However, as Rofel reminds us, we must not ignore the fact that these politics of desire are emerging alongside global capital flows, facilitating the entry of yet another anxiety, mainly that





of determining, “who represents the cultural competence to carry China into the future and to create the wealth and power for the nation under neoliberal capitalism” (Rofel 2007, 95).

Thus, her intention of comprehending this growing cultural concern and indexing the class exclusion present in Chinese queer politics today, Rofel analyzes the performance of Suzhi (Quality) – a local discursive term and practice. The discourse of suzhi can be traced back to the late 1980’s economic revolution when the State claimed that modern China needed new and improved citizens to join its economic endeavors and create a better country. It also echoes the anxiety between urban and rural residents while great numbers of rural residents migrated as workers into the cities to form part of that economic project. This structure of feeling gradually enables Suzhi becoming the hegemonic discourse and social practice through which the distinction between urban and rural was constructed and made sense of. Ann Anagnost demonstrates that Suzhi is: “a sign that transects all these domains: the evaluation of embodied labor; the goal of educational reform (suzhi jiaoyu or “quality education”); the specter of social disorder; the criteria of cosmopolitan citizenship (through consumer taste); and the evaluation of the child’s psychological health (xinli suzhi)” (Anagnost 2004, 192).

In her attempt to rethink suzhi politics, Rofel links its discourse to the Chinese contemporary debates over queer citizenship. She documents the ways in which urban-born gay men employ rhetoric of “low suzhi” to criticize the money-boys, associating their lack of taste and inappropriate sexual behavior to their relationship with money. However, in Rofel’s interviews with some money-boys, this criticism was rejected. They situated their behavior in relation to the spread of global capital and the proliferation and concentration of foreign, white-collar workers in urban areas. Money-boys claimed that, in this context, everyone has the right to pursue the life they want to. For instance, Zhan-Zhan, one of Rofel’s interviewees, responded to the criticism directed against money-boys asking why, if financial arrangements between a husband and housewife were considered normal in society, the same should be deemed problematic when it occurred between two men (106).

Zhan-Zhan’s feedback inspires Rofel to employ the notion of “Cultural Citizenship” as an ideal to be pursued. Through it, she seeks to demonstrate how suzhi politics can help recapture the productive values of neo-liberalism in the queer debate. She also aims to show how, on the



one hand, China's neo-liberalism introduces the cosmopolitan desire to queer citizens while, on the other, it endeavors to authenticate what is considered proper and improper sex. Furthermore, Rofel criticizes the version that presents queer citizens as passive agents who un-reflexively accept the neo-liberal logic. She shows how queer citizens tackle the neo-logic by revealing its violent and hegemonic characteristics.

The author further argues that the so called "global gayness" cannot be suitably applied to the Chinese context, seeing as the neo-liberal logic requires that it be unevenly performed by different subjectivities through diverse social practices. For the Chinese, mapping different queer landscapes includes, amongst others: the legacy of socialism, the cosmopolitan desires from the West, the stigma from the urban gay men, and the pressures of kinship.

Ultimately, the politico-economic analysis that *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public* provides is an important contribution to the field of Queer Studies. It rethinks neo-liberalism as connected to sexuality in its performance of class through the violent and exclusive logic that the same entails. However, if suzhi discourse on queer China became the hegemonic form of politics determined through class issues, the reader may ask how these desiring subjects actually perform class exclusion in the age of individuality and selfhood? That is to mean, how different forms of individuality and personhood were integral to how class interests become inscribed onto different bodies in the name of self (Skeggs 2004, 6). While Rofel here draws from three interviewees to introduce these questions, more interviews with more a diversity of opinions could have proved more revealing for the purposes of this book.

Queer Studies need to be attentive to how global politico-economic powers are reshaping queer subjects of different places and times (Halberstam 2005) and how they negotiate with this global power to rethink the future of sexuality. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public* provides a powerful and nuanced model that begins to do so.



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Mark Carrigan

Driver, Susan. Ed. (2008) *Queer Youth Cultures*. New York: SUNY Press. ISBN: 978-0-7914-7338-2 (paperback). Viii + 307 pp. RRP: \$27.95

Queer youth are too-often denied voice within youth, either through their absence or their stigmatization as an abject other or sympathetic victim. *Queer Youth Cultures* is a challenging and valuable contribution to a growing body of work that seeks to make queer youth visible within mainstream youth research. The book rejects the entrenched tendencies towards pathologising and essentialising methodologies in youth research, seeing these as inadequate for the investigation of queer youth cultures. The diverse range of work collected in the book is unified through a concerted attempt to move beyond long-standing psychologistic approaches and their often concurrent monological and quantitative biases. By doing so, it attempts to foreground both the reflexive capacities of queer youth and the tangled webs of social relations upon which they bring these reflexive capacities to bear. In this sense, *Queer Youth Cultures* follows in the footsteps of a diverse range of writers (Herdt, 1989; Plummer, 1995; Weeks, 1995; Savin-Williams, 2005) who share a concern over giving voice to the lived experience of gay people.

The book stands out because it explicitly recognizes that the highly reflexive life-worlds of queer youth are not insulated from the outcomes of social research and that there are ethical imperatives that follow from it. The book is animated by an awareness of the pernicious and concrete impact that prescriptive and authoritative discourses of youth sexuality have had on the lives of queer youth; both through clinical and educational intermediaries, as well as through popular culture and their own reflexive uptake of these ideas in pursuit of self-clarification. Structurally, the work that forms the main body of the book is presented in three parts. Each section begins with a short introduction written by Driver and is followed immediately by the work of a varied range of academics, educationalists, activists, artists and queer youth (many of whom belong to more than one of these categories).



The first part, “Performative Queer Youth Cultures, Embodiments and Communities”, explores the way queer youth create meanings, as well as the contexts and mediums through which they do so. Particular attention is paid to the do-it-yourself representational practices they engage in. This autonomous and often radical cultural activity is elaborated in Judith Halberstam’s compelling account of queer youth musical subcultures and their complex interrelationship with the lives of those within the scene, as well as the social world beyond it (ch. 1). Additionally, Angela Wilson’s account of lesbian punk rock illustrates the manifold ways in which subcultural involvement can allow meanings and understandings to be produced (relating, in this case, to gender, queerness and the intersections between them) in ways that have both collective and personal significance (ch. 2). The contexts of such practices are not hermetically sealed and the struggles over meanings are partially constitutive and reflective of society’s wider struggles. While such experiences are relatively marginal in relation to wider society and culture, it is this very marginality that often places them at the forefront of cultural change.

The second part of this book, “Desiring Youth and Un/Popular Cultures”, explores the ambiguous status of queer youth within modern mass media. On the one hand, queer youth cultures stand out as nuanced and heterogeneous alternatives to a quasi-monolithic corporate media concerned primarily with increasing economic and cultural homogeneity. On the other hand, queer youth represent a point of openness in terms of their reflexive engagements with corporate media. For example, they are intimately and innovatively queering its cultural artefacts at the same time as their increasing textual inclusion as sympathetic figures leaves them within a deeply polarised order of a heteronormative society. Of particular interest in this section is the critical auto-ethnography, “Queering Pornography”, conducted by a young queer activist and actor in gay porn (ch. 10). It is a fascinating account of the author’s complex trajectory through intersecting worlds of academia, activism, porn and gay culture. His goal resists any easy reduction to politics, academia, art or erotica; that is, “to participate intelligently and critically in the literal production and creation of queer cultures through pornography” (Tortorici, 2008: 214).

The third and final part, “Transforming Political Activism” explores the inseparability of representative and political aspects of queer youth culture. The life-worlds of queer youth are

interwoven with experiences of discrimination, displacement and symbolic erasure, as well as the material inequalities they help fuel and ingrain. The section explores the multiple ways through which the work of queer youth subverts heteronormativity, the practices and critiques that flow from them, and the social and political organizations that allow for these possibilities to be played out.

The main strength of the book lies in the diverse range of contributions that, while distinct, share an over-arching concern with foregrounding queer youth reflexivity, understanding it as, “cultural and political catalysts” (Driver, 2008: 1). The book’s varied accounts not only help to map out the contours of future research, but they also make important theoretical points, as well as illustrating the importance of relating theory to practice. A further strength is the consistent reflexivity of the contributors. As Halberstam explains: “only rarely does the queer theorist stand wholly apart from the subculture examining it with an expert’s gaze” (Halberstam, 2003: 37).

However, the book is not without its faults. An a priori valorisation of queer youth cultures frames the entirety of the book. While this is not, by any means, an inherently damnable quality, it does leave some room for questioning the assessments made of actual queer youth cultural products. It is certainly true that the ambiguous and underdetermined status of queer youth within society and culture creates all manner of possibilities for creative and emancipatory cultural production. However, the notion that sometimes these possibilities may not get put to action is rarely considered. Furthermore, like any cultural producer, queer youth cultural products may at times be uninteresting or unremarkable. Yet, the book maintains that all aspects of queer youth cultural involvement produce political effects, even if these effects may be indirect and contingent. This could be partially explained through the overly-enthusiastic cultural politics that permeate the book. Yet, it doesn’t follow from the interdependence of representative and political aspects of queer youth culture that all representative acts are necessarily political. Suggesting this necessarily elevates the status of queer youth to that of agents of radical cultural change. It misses the fact that, as a matter of contingency, these are similarly situated individuals whose life trajectories may often produce diverse and destabilizing cultural effects. Therefore, it



not only reads the lived experience of queer youth through a previously-established and largely tacit ethico-political project, but it also fails to do justice to the very particularity that *Queer Youth Cultures* aims to give voice to.

To question this aspect of the book doesn't entail some specious and anachronistic demand for value-neutrality within youth research. Instead, it asks that the values that motivate such inquiries be restrained both by a desire for verisimilitude with regards to the actual lives of queer youth and by a concern to utilize research as a basis for political action, rather than allowing itself to be constituted by it. The research project and the political project are analytically distinct realms and this remains so even when we recognise the political and social consequences of youth research, as well as the manifold investments of researchers in the worlds researched.

As Driver argues, the aim of such research should be, “not merely to celebrate the living cultures of queer youth but also to question and theorize the very languages and contexts through which they emerge” (Driver, *ibid.*, 2). Nevertheless, an over- celebration of culture can hinder the project of understanding it. And, while Driver explicitly recognises this, many of the contributions to the book are, to varying degrees, examples of it. Ultimately, *Queer Youth Cultures* offers itself as a provisional analysis.

Still, the possibility of some of the book's practical details being improved upon shouldn't be seen to detract from it, especially given the depth and sophistication of Driver's own approach. Indeed, from the very first page, Driver recognises that the proliferation of queer youth activity and self-organization represents an opportunity to approach queer youth on new terms. As an important contribution to a growing body of work, *Queer Youth Cultures* is an edifying attempt to think through what these new terms may be.





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Allison Moore

Horncastle, J (2008) 'Queer Bisexuality: Perceptions of Bisexual Existence, distinction and Challenges' In: *International Perspectives on Bisexuality* Vol. 8. Nos 1 / 2.

Bisexuality continues to be a much misunderstood and maligned sexuality. Representations in popular culture and, in particular, popular media, continue to reinforce stereotypical and pathological views of bisexuality. People who self identify as bisexual or are identified as bisexual because of their sexual behaviour are variably portrayed as 'confused', 'undecided', 'greedy', 'promiscuous', 'non-monogamous' (Udis-Kessler:1996). These constructions are rooted in and reinforced by both heteronormative and homonormative notions of sexuality. In her article, *Queer Bisexuality: Perceptions of Bisexual Existence, Distinction and Challenges*, Julia Horncastle introduces the notion of 'a kind of bisexuality' or a 'queer bisexuality', which offers the potential to challenge these dominant constructions / perceptions.

Horncastle draws on the concepts, 'Queer' and 'Sexgender', as key for thinking through queer bisexuality. While the term queer has multiple meanings as well as a diverse range of uses, Horncastle employs it in two specific manners. On the one hand, it is embodied, for it represents "a sensibility – a way of being in the world" (p.26). On the other, it can be used as a theoretical tool to articulate non-normativity. Queer, she suggests, has to be understood both ontologically and epistemologically. 'Sexgender', as a concept, is utilized to productively problematize the sex/gender distinction. It illustrates both the separateness of sex and gender, whilst simultaneously demonstrating their "mutability" (p.26) and changeability. It also contextualizes the material conditions through which we live and feel sex and gender. Horncastle argues that it is the 'in-between-ness' or interstitial location of bisexuality, something that exists between heterosexuality and homosexuality, that leads to a queering of bisexuality. Thus, her concept of queer bisexuality is not an attempt to reinforce binary constructions of sexuality or to create oppositional categories of bisexuality (bisexuality v queer bisexuality). Instead, she hopes to re-conceptualize what bisexuality is through the "logic of interstitiality" (p.28); that is, through an

analysis of the non-normative space bisexuality occupies between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

In order to go about this, Horncastle explores dominant constructions of bisexuality by referencing two examples from the popular media. The first comes from a 2005 New York Times article entitled: 'Straight, Gay or Lying? Bisexuality Revisited' (cited on p.28). Based on 'scientific research', the article claimed that bisexuality in men was non-existent and that men who stated to be so were, in fact, either gay or straight. The second example, again in 2005, comes from a queer community newspaper in Perth, Western Australia, which also draws from 'scientific research' to attack bisexuals, and more specifically, bisexual men. What connects these examples is the fact that both were based on the same 'scientific research', both provoked similar responses from pro-bisexuality activists and both were noticeable for the lack of consideration of bisexual women. She later refers to this absence as an illustration of how the existing unitary model of bisexuality demonstrates different ways of knowing about bisexual men and bisexual women. She suggests that whilst the counter-attack from pro-bisexual activists against these media representations was not surprising, "the absence of articulating a bisexual complexity that might, for example, mention queerness" (p.30) was remarkable. She proposes that bisexual politics / activism needs to move beyond a narrowly defined defensive and reactionary position to one that is proactive, portraying the complexity of bisexuality and offering the possibility of a queer bisexuality. In doing so, not only does this challenge discriminatory and pathological constructions of bisexuality, but it also expands the epistemological terrain of sexuality.

However, it is not enough to simply problematize popular constructions of bisexuality. Queer ontology (ways of being) needs to be linked to a queer epistemology (ways of knowing). Horncastle proposes both a proliferation of categories of sexuality, as well as an increased movement across and between sexual categories as a way to strike at the foundations of the inflexibility and rigidity of those categories. Ultimately, she argues for an expansion of the "existing pool of sexgender knowledge" (p.33).

If there is to be an expansion of ways of knowing about sexuality, then there also has to be an expansion in the ways of talking about sex and sexuality, what Horncastle calls: "a

concepto-lingual boom” (33). This is a distinctly queer way of communicating which is not reliant on, nor limited by heteronormative language. Articulating a notion of queer bisexuality would at least offer the possibility of opening up what is known and what is knowable about bisexuality. It offers the potential to transcend the hetero-homo binary and bisexuality’s relational position within it. That is, instead of being understood in a heteronormative or homonormative framework, it allows bisexuality to be articulated non-normatively. Nevertheless, in proposing this shift, Horncastle is mindful of the barriers that need to be overcome. Mainly, dominant models of sexuality emphasise essentialism, fixidity and dichotomy, presenting sexuality as an ‘either/or’ binary. This dominant hetero or homonormative framework continues to regulate, discipline and contain non-normative sexualities, whether it be queer bisexuality or some other form of queerness.

By queering bisexuality, a number of sexgender categories are disrupted. Firstly, it questions privileging gender as sexual object- a formula that typically defines a person’s sexuality according to their partner’s gender. Not only has this conflation of sexuality and gender / sexual object choice limited the perceptions of bisexuality and served to maintain bisexual invisibility, this unitary view has also oversimplified the complexity of sexual desire and masked the plurality of determinants in sexual object-choice. Secondly, it would undermine the notion of a unified form of bisexuality (which has limited the nature and form that bisexuality is perceived as taking), opening up the space for a multiplicity and heterogeneity of experiences. Lastly, it critiques and challenges the taboo of polyamory or nonmonogamy. For Horncastle, polyamory differs from nonmonogamy in that where the latter represents a challenge to monogamy, the former “critiques monogamy (in terms of practice and ideology) and nonmonogamy (the term)” (p.45). By suggesting ways in which queer bisexuality troubles sexgender categories, she clearly and articulately makes the case for the necessity to link queer ontology and epistemology and, perhaps, this is the greatest strength of this piece. By criss-crossing sexgender categories, Horncastle not only queers the category of bisexuality, she also makes the unfamiliar familiar.

There are people the world over leading queer lives or, in Horncastle’s words, “queer sex gender self-knowledge exists” (p.46). The challenge lies in how this gets articulated and disseminated. What lies ahead is confronting how notions of queer bisexuality can be expressed



and experienced in ways that expand the sexgender knowledge pool, rather than being (mis)interpreted as yet another fixed category of sexuality within the existing hetero / homo normative framework. While the parameters of this article, arguably, preclude a detailed analysis of the ways in which queer communication can actually lead to an expansion of sexgender knowledge, it does raise important, thought-provoking questions about the relationship between the ontology and epistemology of queer bisexuality.

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